

# **Solomons Time**

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**As told to John McCormick**

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## *Life in Kansas*

I was a country builder, I built houses, I did renovations in the hills and elsewhere and when dad took a bit sick and decided that he didn't want to do it any more I saw this advert in the paper for a leading hand with Civil & Civic on a job in King St, I remember it, Scottish Amicable. A man called John Urbans, the Victorian manager of Civil & Civic interviewed me and he said, "What background do you have in construction?", I told him and he said, "That's pretty limited, what do you want to do?", I told him that I wanted to expand what I could do, he said that he had a job at this particular plant as a leading hand but he said, "It's got pretty huge potential, we're going into a new phase of building in Australia, we've got all sorts of plans to change everything in building, I need somebody with an open mind, someone who's prepared to go in there and look at things from a different viewpoint from the original. I think that you've got the mind to look at things in a different way." Which I did.

I'd never done a multi-storey building in my life, I don't know whether Urbans had gone to America or he'd gone anywhere but he was pretty clued up, he knew that the old ways had to change and that we had to develop new ways of working. He knew that a new era was coming, he could see it. Big buildings were going to be built in a totally different way

So he gave me a job as leading hand on this building site. I was leading hand for three months, I was promoted to sub-foreman, I was in that role for about five months when I was made general foreman. I'd been there less than a year.

I didn't have a clue about how to build big buildings. The way that they'd set it up was that they'd built the building in sections, that a gang would look after a certain part, another gang would look after another part. I first went there as leading hand, I built the two end beams of the building, and that was it! I was leading hand and I looked after that particular part and then I expanded as sub-foreman, looking after other sections and then as foreman looking after the whole building.

I must give Urbans great credit for this, he wanted me to look at this with open eyes, as someone who hasn't experienced the old ways. He said, "Building in the heart of Melbourne had been done a certain way for generations and we've got to change that because it's too bloody slow, we've got to change the whole attitude of how things can be built". I looked at it from a different viewpoint and that's the way it eventuated

Our relationship wasn't always smooth, I'd fronted him about a couple of jobs and he never liked it. He was one of those blokes who was the boss and he knew best, nothing you said was any good. We had a big confrontation on Christ College, which is now part of Chadstone. I was the project manager on the job, it was built pretty cheaply with cement blocks and when we were doing the final inspection with the school headmaster and a couple of the board members they said that they didn't like the finish on the concrete blocks. I told them that we couldn't do any more, we'd washed them down with acid twice and the finish was embedded into the concrete block and we couldn't wash it out.

Urbans said that I had to give it another go and get it out. I said, unwisely in front of the client in retrospect, that I'd just told him that there was no point in doing it again and that in fact it could even do some damage.

He collared me afterwards and gave me a real roasting. I apologised for contradicting him in front of a client but said that if he was going to make statements like that he should ask me beforehand, I told him that I didn't say these things to big note myself, it's because they're true. I said that I worked with these people every day, I couldn't tell them something was going to happen when I knew that it wouldn't. In the end he backed down a bit.

There was another time when we were doing a 14 storey building in King Street, I'd only been working with the firm for about six months and I was a sub-foreman. On this job we had four teams, two doing the main beams at each end of the building, a team doing the columns under the floor and another team doing the floor itself. With this setup we were doing a floor a week which was legendary stuff, no one in the Australian construction industry had ever done that pace before. The number of people who came to look at that site over the six month period was unbelievable, Chinese, Japanese, Americans, all wanting to know how we managed to finish a floor a week. I spent half my time playing bloody tour guide.

I didn't think that it was so revolutionary, it was just that no one had ever looked at it the way we did and convinced themselves that it could be done. Urbans had started the process off and that's what he wanted me to do, to provide new ideas on his sites and to represent him.

John didn't even tell me that he'd told everyone else that it was going to be like that, it only emerged when the foreman of one of the jobs that I was working on had a go at me for being Urbans "guy", he said that anything I suggested, John did!

John wasn't convinced that the floor a week would work, I said that we should try it and that if he didn't trust me then I'd be better off going. He agreed to try it for a week, and off he stormed!

The site manager came up to me afterwards and asked me what the hell I'd done to John because he was in a foul mood. I told him and he was amazed, he said that I was the first one to ever tell John what they were doing and actually get to do it!

Anyway, the week goes past and the system is working pretty well, we made a few adjustments but generally it was good. To be fair to John he came up to me afterwards and told me that I was right after all. He then got all of the other Civil & Civic site managers from Brisbane and Sydney to come down and see how this was done.

The more time though that I spent working in commercial construction the more browned off I'd become by the building industry in Melbourne. I felt that the construction industry was being overpowered by the union movement, the builders were being subjected to a very strong campaign by the unions, they were dominating everything that was going on, everything was dictated about what they wanted to do, and the poor old builders had no say in the matter whatsoever.

It had even got to the point where it was possible that the big building companies may have withdrawn from the market, in fact I had advocated that to several of the firms that I had worked for, to freeze all projects, and pull out of the industry for 6 months. I suggested to the Master Builders Association that they do the same thing. That they say, "we're not going to proceed anywhere until such time as you come to a reasonable talking point where both parties could get together".

It was just getting catastrophic the way things were going. I felt that the building companies wouldn't do that though, they looked at the short term situation rather than the long term, that they looked at their immediate profits in the next year rather than their profits over the next ten years. I got totally browned off by the way that it was going and thought that there must be an easier way to make a living without having to put up with this. I couldn't hack it any more.

I felt that this collapse of the building companies to the unions was just not on.

Just then my best friend Colin Jamieson who was working at St. Leonards school in Brighton said to me that there was a job going there as Works Manager, and that if I was interested I could go along and talk to the Headmaster. Which I did, and he gave me the job. They had a big program of expansion there, they were doubling the size of the school, so I was employed as the schools representative on that building programme. They were duplicating the middle school and the senior school at that stage. The works programme was quite small, nowhere near the size of the commercial buildings that I'd been building in the city previously.

I stayed at St. Leonards for a year. They had already started the expansion project when I got there and we did a significant amount of the work while I was there. I suppose that we'd completed about three quarters of the project by the time I left. The work hadn't exactly started to wind down but it was at its peak.

## ***Why would I want to leave Kansas?***

One day, John Urbans, my old boss from Civil and Civic, just rang me out of the blue and said, “would you like to go to the Solomon Islands?” His firm wasn’t involved in the Solomons, he wasn’t currently doing anything there, he’d left Civil & Civic, he’d had a serious heart attack, he felt that he had to slow down. A friend of his, who he’d gone through University with, Brian Derrick, had bought some companies in the Solomon Islands and he’d asked John to help him out in bringing people into the Solomon Islands to manage these different companies that he’d bought.

I’m not sure what Brian Derrick’s motivation was to establish businesses in the Solomons, there was quite a bit of work going on there, he was an architect based in Fiji, and he’d bought these companies because he knew that there’d be a lot of expansion in the Solomon Islands. So originally he bought the main company, which was Concrete Industries, and subsequently he bought a number of other companies.

He went to the Solomons because at that time Fiji was pretty well covered, Vanuatu at that time was still under the control of the French and British governments and didn’t at that stage seem to be looking at any significant expansion, whereas the Solomons was going through a phase where the British wanted to get out, independence had certainly been suggested long before that, Australia was getting more and more involved because it was so close, there was also a lot of interest from the United States because of the history from places such as Guadalcanal and Henderson Field. They’d never pushed to be in there, but Australia was in a position where it could be because it had already established itself there.

Brian Derrick felt that there was a profit to be made there, and he was really interested in the indigenous population, he felt that there was a lot that could be done there for the indigenous population. Fiji was pretty settled at that stage, whereas the Solomon Islands wasn't, it was very undeveloped.

When I got the job I hadn't even met Brian Derrick, it was all done through John Urbans. John and Brian had gone to University together, Brian did architecture, John did engineering, his father was a surveyor, he'd worked on the Snowy Mountains scheme. John was the chief surveyor on the Kiewa scheme, he then went to work for Civil & Civic as Victorian Branch Manager. Brian had been in Fiji for 25-30 years.

Brian and John were quite different. Brian was probably quieter in his approach, he could be quite firm when he wanted to be but he wasn't like Urbans, who was a very domineering man, clever bastard though. I learnt so much from that bloke, more in my first year at Civil & Civic than in the previous 20 years. What they had in common was that they put people in charge that they trusted.

I first met Brian when I went back the second time after my scouting trip. He asked me a lot of questions about what I'd done and why I'd done it. He said that I came with a fantastic recommendation from Urbans and that therefore I was good enough for him.

Brian said that this was a new enterprise for us, that we didn't know anything about the Solomon Islands, so he was relying on me to fathom it all out. He wanted me to report to him in three months about what had happened, good or bad.

Urbans had said to me that I had to change the way that the people thought. At that time I didn't comment because I didn't know anything about them.

John didn't actually work for Brian, he worked for himself but was contracting to Brian.

Brian wanted me to go there as construction chief of the main construction company in the Solomon Islands, Concrete Industries, and because of his tie up with John Urbans he needed someone who had a good basic knowledge of the construction industry, a generalist, who had a good basic idea about construction, from the grass roots up to the multi-storey stuff. He said that he needed somebody who could go in there to re-align the works that were there. Concrete Industries before then had been owned by a German bloke, he was a pretty clued up bloke, he knew what he was doing, but he didn't know how to expand, to bring it all together, and John thought that I was the bloke who had that knowledge.

Brian's company, Solomon Islands Investments, was made up of Concrete Constructions the major construction company, involved in that construction company was a concrete works that built pipe works, there was a concrete mixing plant, there was a joinery company and a couple of ancillary companies, there was a store that sold everything to do with building products. They were the major ones that I had to go there to manage.

Brian Derrick didn't actually do anything to sell the role to me, I didn't even meet him until after I got to the Solomon Islands, it was all done through John Urbans. He said that he needed someone with a very strong knowledge of building, not only building multi-story work but someone who could come in from the outside and work in a different environment and produce what they wanted to produce. He wanted someone who could grow the business because he felt that it was the largest construction company in the Solomon Islands and it had a huge potential to go everywhere.

Even before I got there they already did most of the work for the Solomon Islands Government which at that stage was run by the British Colonial Service, they did most of the work for the Public Works Department.

So what was in it for me to exchange a nice comfy job in Melbourne, 40 minutes to work, and leave the country? Well for one thing I couldn't stand the schoolteachers! They were such a pack of whinging bastards, you couldn't believe what they whinged about, they just whinged about every single thing that happened, every bloody day! It was a bit small time and I got totally frustrated and I said to my boss at St. Leonards, "How much authority do I have here?", and he said, "Karel, you have ultimate authority, you can tell them to piss off, you are my contact with the building company and everything that happened had to come back through me to you to them".

It was a fairly major construction that they were doing there, it was quite a large contract but the people using it were a bit small time. I could have gone elsewhere in Australia but I was totally browned off, I was totally frustrated with the union domination of the building industry all over Australia, it wouldn't have helped if I'd have gone to Sydney, it wouldn't have been any different there, anywhere in Australia would have been the same. Offshore was tempting even though I hadn't even dreamt of going offshore, it came out of nowhere. John Urbans rang me one night and said, "Karel I've got a job for you", I said, "John, I've already got a job! Quite a good job", and he said, "Karel, that's not the job for you". He knew me.

I was fairly reluctant to make the move but Urbans said to me, "I'll arrange a ticket for you to go over there, you can have a look around, have a look at the companies that you're going to be looking after, mainly Concrete Industries which was the major company and come back and tell me whether you're interested or not". So I jump on any airplane and land at Honiara. I was even assigned a minder, Nuku, the manager of Concrete Industries. He met me at the plane, he spoke very good English, he was a Fijian Indian, and had been there for some quite considerable period of time and he filled me in as we went along.

So I fly up to check it out. I was there for two days, with strict instructions from Mary to investigate the housing situation, I went to see a house down on the beach, a couple up on what they called The Ridge, which overlooked Honiara. She left it to me, she wanted to know what we could buy there, whether you could buy clothes, food. There was a lot of local produce, meat came in from Australia and New Zealand on a ship about once a fortnight, there was no local meat, no slaughtering. There were no sheep, you could buy chickens.

In some ways it might have been regarded as being pretty brave for the family to let me choose the house, but on the other hand I did know a lot about houses and Mary wasn't thinking too well at that time, after her mum died, she fell in a hole. That was one of the main reasons why I decided to go there, because I thought that it would be better if she got away from there. I thought that her dad started to rely on her far too much so I thought that it was a good time to get away, to get her into a new situation.

I arrive back to the house that I had almost finished building, it was about 95% complete but now I wasn't actually going to be able to live in it. I'd spent most of my non-working days and nights over the past two or three years under arc lights building this house. I'd already organised the painter to come in and finish it off and it turned out that he ended up living in the house the whole time we were away. He even finished all the painting work while he lived there. He worked for the company that I'd previously worked for and lived in the hills. He asked me what I was going to do with the house while we were away, found out that we were going to rent it and asked whether he could live there, so that fell into place pretty easily, that solved a lot of problems there.

I couldn't possibly leave without spending at least one night in the house so I organised a symbolic one night stay just before we left, we all slept on the floor but at least we could stay that we'd sort of lived in it!

Mary was initially hesitant about it but I said to her that she had a houseboy so she didn't have to do any housework or cooking. We could go to the Guadalcanal club at any time, lots of people would invite her to their house for cards. I'd been told that there was always going to be something to do which was strange because there was no TV, and you didn't listen to the local radio.

In order to convince myself to stay I had to look at housing, schools, whether I could get on with the people who were there. I found out that there were quite a few Australians there, a few New Zealanders, but mainly English, quite a few Fijians, Chinese and the rest were the local population.

So my first impressions of Honiara, after two days, the lead item in my report back to management was "Bloody hot"; and sweaty and humid. There was a normal wet and dry season, the dry season wasn't too bad but the wet season was very much like Northern Australia, places like Cairns, you had to have heaters in your wardrobes to stop your clothes going mouldy.

So the decision is "Go". I then have to decide whether there is furniture there but that was all accounted for and if I needed to get any more I could always get the joinery firm to build it!

## ***I don't think we're in Kansas any more***

When we first arrived on Air Pacific via Brisbane we only had our basic clothes, we sent over a case that came over on a boat that arrived about two weeks later. So we arrived with not much more than the clothes on our backs but with the comforting instructions from Brian Derrick that if we needed to buy anything that we were to just go out and do it. At this point, after a little investigation of her own, Mary went crook at me about my assurances about clothes buying, it was technically true that you could buy clothes but it turned out that they were mainly for the locals.

The kids were all really excited, a new adventure, there was very little selling required for them, Mary was a bit both ways, sad to be leaving her dad but then he came to stay with us a lot of the time anyway! He came over for all of each winter. When we lobbed there it was very, very hot and we moved into the house.

One of our houseboys had been picked out for us when we got there. He was all right but he was getting on a bit and he only lasted about six months. He wasn't a brilliant houseboy, we put up with it because we didn't really know anything about it but after Mary started to meet other people around and did some comparisons we realised that he just wasn't up to it. Mary was quite adamant that he wasn't up to the job but that didn't stop her crying when he left. It turned out that he was quite pleased to go back to his village.

Given that Mary and the kids had never had servants before they had to learn what to expect from the houseboys, what they do and what you do, but they soon worked out how things operated from talking to the other locals.

Whether it was a church group or any other social group, everybody went to it, it was very homogenous, everybody mixed in together, whether they were Catholic or Seventh Day Adventists, Bahai. There were quite a few Scottish people there so there was Hogmanay, Robbie Burns night they were all very good events.

After initially socialising mainly with Australians we quickly broadened our social group, I got to know a lot of people in the British service, and a few of the senior Chinese so it got to be a very broad mix of people that we saw.

The first job that I did when I arrived was to reorganise the office. This gave me my first experience of “Honiara Time”. Everything was Honiara Time, nothing went fast. I’d only been there about a week and Urbans came, we talked about things and he said that I had to make changes really quickly, to change the culture, to bring in more of the indigenous people into the company. He wanted me to focus very heavily on them, to bring them much more into the mainstream of the work. Almost all of the senior positions were held by expats.

Brian Derrick had recognised that with self government on the way that it would be good to promote the indigenous people so that they’d have some chance. He’d gone through the exercise in Fiji because he’d lived there for about 20 years and he’d seen what happened there so he was very keen to promote the local population if at all possible. His theory was that the company would be more successful, local people would prefer to hire local people, the government would prefer us to hire more local people.

When I sent my first report to Brian I said that I was sorry but I had to tell him what John had told me about how it needed to go and that in my opinion it couldn’t be done. You couldn’t break Honiara time like that. I told him that it would take generations before that sort of change could take place, that all we could do was to encourage them and let them do it, we couldn’t do it to them. I told him that it was much more likely that someone like Nuku could do it, but that we couldn’t.

Brian came over from Fiji, John came up from Melbourne and we had a storming flaming row. John still insisted that we could make the change but I'd told Brian that it wasn't going to work. Brian said that he had to make a decision about what to do. He didn't do it at the time.

So, next time Brian came, about two or three weeks later, he told me that he'd informed John that he agreed with me. I think a lot of his thinking behind that decision was influenced by his experiences in Fiji. It was far more advanced than the Solomons but had gone through the same process. Urbans wasn't happy with me, I was his guy, he'd got me the job and now I was telling Brian a different story from what he was. After that decision Urbans bowed out from coming up, he said that if I wanted to run the show that was fair enough. My relationship with John was still pretty good after that though, he wasn't a one for holding grudges.

In some respects that relationship was similar to the one I established with Nuku, my second in command at Concrete Industries, he snapped back at me a couple of times and I thought that it was fine, I needed to know if I was wrong.

The very first thing he showed me was the Concrete Industries office. It was quite a good office, right in the middle of Honiara, a relatively modern building. He explained everything, about all the jobs that we had going at the moment, which weren't many. At that time Concrete Industries employed about 100 people, so it was quite a reasonable size.

The place in which I chose to live was down on the beach, our neighbour on one side was the bloke who ran the joinery works, an Australian, nice bloke, our neighbour on the other wide was another Australian who'd been living in the Solomons for quite some time and who ran stores in Honiara itself. So we had Australians on both sides, so we felt a bit at home.

Never having left the country for years before I thought that there might be lots of paperwork but the major item required was a Work Permit from the Solomons government. That was mainly done through the British, a bloke in Honiara who I had to go and meet. It was all a pretty laid back process as everything else was in the Solomons at that time. The process involved him asking me what I was going to do here, I told him, he then says, "Oh OK that's all right". He knew all about the business, the bloke who'd run it before was a German who'd been there for years. He'd started there in about 1946, which was a pretty brave thing for a German to do. Unsurprisingly he wasn't terribly popular.

Even Kerrie liked it there initially but then she began to dislike it and wanted to come home. That might have been part the age she was but also not helped, which I didn't know about at the time, by my mum writing her letters pleading with her to come home and live with her. I think that if Kerrie had thought about it a bit harder she might have stayed there, but she said that she wanted to go back and we didn't stop her. She was getting to the age when she had to make her own decisions.

Lisa and Shane just loved it, absolutely loved it.

There was a Seventh Day Adventist school in Honiara that did a curriculum from Australia by post so they did that. They went to the school , the teachers teach them but the curriculum was set from Australia.

The only thing that I knew about the Solomon Islands was that there was a big battle fought there during the Second World War over a fairly long period over Henderson Field which was the main airbase there. Other than that I'd heard a bit about it from Australian guys who had worked there as coast watchers, there'd been a couple of shows on TV about coast watchers in the Solomon Islands, that they were very much against the Japanese and did everything that they possibly could to make it difficult for them because the Japanese treated them pretty badly when they did land there, so they weren't at all happy with them and they were only too happy to help the Allies in any shape or form that they could.

It was a British colony before the war, after the war the British just went back in and took it over again. There was a Governor there when we got there, very much part of the British Raj, he had a very aloof attitude towards the locals, didn't see much future for them at all. He just looked after the British who were there and wasn't terribly interested in the locals at all.

Honiara at that time was a town about the size of Boronia in Melbourne. When we first went there, there were quite a few expats, a good 10% of the population, but the indigenous population built up quite dramatically after that because it was the only place that there was any work, there was work going on in Honiara that drew them in from the outlying islands because there wasn't much work anywhere else.

Most of the expats worked for the British, the government was run by the British, the Public Works was run by the British. There was a fairly hefty population of Chinese who ran all the stores, they were the commerce side of it, but they seemed to get on pretty well with the locals, the locals obviously needed them because they didn't seem to be able to run anything themselves. The Chinese were very good at that.

The other major group there were the Japanese. It was a little weird having them there because there were still people alive who had pretty bad experiences with the previous generation of Japanese. They were there primarily for the tuna. The tuna fishing grounds around the Solomon Islands were the richest in the world. This was because the Japanese had wiped out the previous record holding area, the Marianas, so they were looking for new areas to harvest tuna.

Up until the time of the war the capital of the Solomons was Alki, an island about 25 miles away, a much smaller island. I think the reason that it was the capital was that it had a big enclosed harbour on which the seaplanes could land. There were no airstrips anywhere. All the British had was a chief on Alki and a representative on each of the other five islands.

By the time the Yanks left Honiara had grown into a much bigger town, primarily because of the airfield, Henderson Field. They'd put up huge numbers of buildings, the Chinese had moved in and started commerce.

Even in the 1970s there were virtually no Americans there at all, I think I met maybe four Americans in the whole place in the whole time I was there. Whenever we found bones that were proven to be American a crew flew in and took them away.

One day a year though lots of them flew in for a memorial at Henderson field, 40 or 50 of them would turn up, war tourists, some of them came every year. We liked it because they booked out our Mendana hotel!

There were lots of relics from the war, lots of old guns, tanks, pillboxes. They were spread all over the place, there was no way of telling whether they were American or Japanese unless you found the dog tags.

The biggest piece of equipment we ever found was a tank, Shane and I were exploring one of the rivers to the west and we came across this old tank in the jungle, not the biggest tank ever but over 15 feet long and 6 feet wide.

It's potentially a bit creepy, but the first thing we did was to check whether there was anyone inside it, which we did and luckily found no one.

We had no idea how many people died in Honiara during the war. I did ask and got the answer, "many". Now "many" from a local can mean anything from 10 to 20,000. The most accurate estimate I got was from the American veterans when they came, I asked one bloke who was there for the entire siege. I asked him how many he shot and he said that he alone shot over 3,000. He said that he had a machine gun and every time he mowed one lot down they just kept coming, wave after wave of them.

He said that if they'd been overrun then the field would have been taken, he said that they had banks of machine guns. The approach that they had to come through was very narrow between the land and the sea. This was also complicated by the fact that the Japanese had no air support, all the Japanese troops arrived by ship, came ashore and tried to storm the airfield.

A lot of them never even made it ashore. Ironbottom Sound was only three miles wide at its widest point and it narrowed near Sabo Island, which was an active volcano, to about 100 metres wide. The ships had to come through it, there was no other way. So at that point the Japanese were like sitting ducks, the planes just annihilated them. They never were able to produce an accurate estimate of how many ships were sunk there but everyone agrees that it was more than 1,000.

This is all happening right outside our house. We actually dived on a few of the wrecks but we couldn't see very much, by that time they were pretty well covered and rusting away.

There was a big Australian salvage crew there bringing up all the ammunition and brass. They used to ship away loads of brass, the Americans also dumped hundreds of tons of munitions into the sea when they left. They built a pier out from red beach and just drove trucks full of ammunition straight over the end, the blokes would jump out and the trucks would fly straight off the end.

Even though so many people had died there I never saw any ghosts or anything like that, Kerrie sais that she saw and heard some strange things so I suppose it is possible. There were a heck of a lot of people who died there. It was very deep, over a mile. It dropped off very quickly, there was a bit of a reef right outside our house, which was great for snorkelling but after the edge it went straight down. I was very wary, I wouldn't let the kids go, they had to stay at least 20 metres back from the edge.

One smart Japanese Navy bloke tried to outsmart the Yanks and landed his people further up the island and tried to come down by land via this valley that was supposed to go all the way to the coast. Unfortunately no one told him that it was full of water, they just couldn't get through it, it was swamp and they were trying to drive tanks through it, drive howitzers through it. Everything just sank, there must be thousands of tons of stuff up there.

There were three main groups in the Solomon Islands, the Polynesians, Melanesians, and Micronesians. The default state was that they didn't get on with each other and never had. It was only in 1968 that cannibalism had been stopped, I'd heard stories of how a missionary had been eaten on one of the islands because he didn't do what they wanted him to do. A serious failure to read your audience I reckon.

There was quite a lot of gold in the Solomon Islands, in Guadalcanal. A lot of people announced their intentions to go prospecting but they never came back. The islanders killed them. In many ways it was pretty lawless, in the major towns it was OK but once you got away from that, the tribal influences took over and that was it.

The only island that was really developed was Guadalcanal because the Americans had been there and the locals had learned something about a different culture. Munda had endured the Japanese for about three years.

The only island that was inhabited all over was Malata, all of the other islands only had population around the edges. I don't know why Malata got developed all over, the fact that it didn't have the mountains in the middle like the others may have helped. But when I say developed, the total population of Malata was only about 12,000. The rest of the islands just had villages.

I went to all of the islands at least once, in many cases just to help the Public Works Dept to spend the money that was allocated to the small islands, I'm not convinced that a great amount of money actually needed to be spent there. Even that was difficult because they couldn't agree with each other. I went to the Russell Islands once, I went to PNG, Nauru.

Munda had the most potential, it had a massive amount of timber, they'd found some bauxite, which I'm not convinced was ever exploited.

The most horrendous trip I did was to Choisal. There were only about 4,000 people on the whole of the island but that was enough to have two warring tribes and politics! I suspect that the reason that there was only 4,000 was that they kept killing each other.

There was no airfield on the island so I had to go to one of the Russell Islands that had an airfield because Lever & Kitchen was there and get a speedboat for about 50 miles. I was met at the mouth of the river by an outrigger canoe with sadly no Hawaii-5-0 music and was then taken to the village.

Choisal hadn't really been affected by the war, I don't know why the Japanese didn't go there, maybe they figured out that with the politics and the swamps it wasn't worth it.

Guadalcanal and Munda had the two airfields, Guiso had been populated by the British, they even had a hotel there, the first thing that the British always build. There was even some tourism there, diving parties and the like.

## ***This definitely isn't Kansas***

An average day starts early, 6 am, most of the neighbours are up then as well, if I was on a job I'd be gone by 7 am, if I was swanning around the office I could leave at 8 am. Mary would normally go for morning tea somewhere, then she'd go for lunch somewhere, then she'd go out and play cards somewhere. We'd then meet at someone's place at about 6:30 pm for drinks, we'd then go home and either have dinner at home or get changed, have a bit of a rest then go out at about 9 pm for dinner.

We had to deal with all sorts of ethnic groups. Naurans never did any work, they lived on the guano, they used to bring in their household servants from the Philippines, when they had a spur of the moment party they just jumped on a plane to the Solomons which was the nearest place with grog, cleaned it out and flew back.

The plane used to fly from Melbourne, stop in Honiara just to refuel, go on to Nauru, then fly on to Okinawa, then to Tokyo. They used to get on in Nauru, go to Honiara then go back to Nauru. This somewhat upset the other passengers who were expecting to fly on to Okinawa.

Their locust tendencies didn't stop at grog, they also used to descend on the market and buy every single vegetable in the entire place. Whenever I found out they were coming I used to phone Mary and say, "The Naurans are coming", "Aaargh she'd cry, I've got to get to the market before them then" and she'd get Henry to race up there as a matter of urgency before they stripped it out.

The Naurans also had a ship that used to bring their good from Australia, that also used to stop at Honiara and load on more stuff on the way. When they wanted something they would just command the ship to return to wherever they wanted it to go. One time Air Nauru arrived, my manager of the Toyota dealership said that the Naurans had just been in, and had told him that the plane wasn't going back to Melbourne as planned, that it was going to Fiji. I asked him why, apparently the President had an appointment with the President of Fiji and had just commandeered the plane and decided that he needed it to fly him to Fiji. All of the other passengers got a free side trip to Fiji.

The Guadalcanal club was also just going through a change phase. When I first got there the locals weren't allowed to go in there, it was a British thing, Solomon Mamaloni, the future Chief Minister, was the first one to say to me that he didn't like it, didn't think that it was right, and asked whether something couldn't be done about it.

I started talking to some of the other Australian members there, there were also quite a few Kiwis, some Americans and asked them whether they had any objections. They all agreed that it was a good idea to bring the local people in as long as they conformed to the same standards as everyone did in regard to dress code etc. There was some concern about drunkenness because a lot of locals had a drink problem, many of them had too much time on their hands, but overall they were prepared to give it a go.

So I went before the club board and suggested it. Of course all the Poms said, "No bloody way, we're not going to have it", I kept insisting that it should be put to a vote of the members. They certainly didn't like that, they held it up for about 2-3 weeks but finally relented when I threatened to call a meeting myself. They said, "You can't do that, you're not on the committee". "You just watch me, I'll do it anyway", I replied. The vote was an overwhelming "Yes". My relationship with some of the stuck up Poms never recovered but that didn't worry me too much. "If you don't like it, don't come" I said to them. I was pretty popular with the locals though.

There were all sorts of religions represented in the Solomons, you name it, they were all there. We never got to see all of these multi-faiths operating at Christmas because we were always home each year. The other “religious” occasions were the ones that Scots celebrated, Hogmanay and Robbie Burns night, not strictly religious but treated as such. We treated anyone’s national holiday as an excuse to have a party.

I got on very well with the Japanese. They’d put in a lot of work after the war, trying to smooth things over with the locals. They put money in plus in the 1950s they had a huge crew of people there for whenever a body was found. They also did a lot to help the locals rebuild the economy.

I did have to be very astute working with them, the majority of them spoke good English. It was easy to get to know them because they were all mad keen golfers. They were also welcoming to me initially, the managing director of Taiyo came to my office to welcome me to the Solomons. He did have an ulterior motive for being nice to me because he wanted me to build him some tuna canneries.

Right at the end of the first year Nuku came to me and said that I had to come down to the village with him and throw out all of the people. I said, “What are you talking about?” He said that it only happened once a year. There was an area in Honiara, a village, where Concrete Industries owned all of the houses, about 100 of them, and our workers lived in them.

In Solomon Island society villages are made up of extended families, they have what’s called a “one-toc” system where everyone in that village is a relation of yours. If a baby dies from one mother then another one will automatically take them over and look after them, they would become their child. Every village had a tribal elder and a council. It was a pretty good system, all the villages were the same.

Nuku told me that if anyone had a house and someone came to stay, you couldn't throw them out. So, years ago, we devised a system where we'd go round and throw them out and that I had to do it. I said, "Why can't you do it?" and he replied, "Because I'm not the boss, you are, and the boss has to do it". He'd be there to translate if required but I had to do it. This was done every year.

I thought, "How am I bloody going to throw out all of these mums and kids?" Apparently after they're thrown out they go back to the village or island that they came from, and they seem to accept it quite happily.

The process is always done in the dry season, just before Christmas (not my idea of a great present!) and the way the process works is that we showed up, went to the first house, and Nuku says "There's the Concrete Industries employee, there's his wife, there are the three kids. All of the other people in this house are one-tocs and they have to go". So I just point at each one that Nuku had indicated and said, "You have to go".

To my amazement every single one of them just said, "Yes master", packed up their stuff and left! Some of them weren't happy about it and one or two of them got angry and said something but to each of them Nuku said the same reply and they immediately shut up and left. Afterwards I asked him what he said and he wouldn't tell me but it was obviously pretty effective!

Some of the houses had twelve or fourteen people in them. Anyway, 100 houses cleared! It took us all bloody day! I was exhausted at the end of the day and I must admit that I felt a bit strange about it. I asked Nuku what would happen now, whether any of them would come back and he said that some of them would and that we'd have to repeat the process next year and every year.

Even stranger, on the following day when I was going round our work sites, dozens of our employees whose relations had been thrown out came up to me, shook me by the hand and said, "Thank you master" because they couldn't do it because they were family.

One young kid who I thought had a lot of promise, he was a good kid, he'd learned carpentry from the missionaries up in the Western Solomons. When I got there he was a leading hand and I promoted him to sub-foreman. Nuku also took him under his wing and really started to get some good ideas into his head, he had a very firm plan that this kid should be in his position in four or five years.

In my third year there, just after I'd come back from Christmas holidays at home, he comes up to me and told me that he was leaving. I asked him why, he had a good job, his family was with him, he was earning good money, a lot of which he sent back to his village. He said that he had to return to his village. They needed him to build something in his village and that was it. I tried everything to change his mind, I offered to get a crew to build it for him but he refused. He had to build it himself. So he went and never returned. That's just how their system works.

The other unusual tribal custom I encountered was that girls in a village, even when they're quite young, can have sex with anyone in the village except, obviously, their immediate family. This was completely normal, I never found out why, it was just part of their customs. It didn't even matter if they had children very early either because the tribe just adopted them into the extended family so they could always be certain that their child would be well cared for, they'd just become one-tocs!

I once went to Choisal to plan the road that the tribal chiefs wanted built between their two villages. There were two villages on the island about four kilometres apart that involved further canoe trips to visit both.

To spend the money that they were randomly allocated by the Poms, one of them got an idea in his head that he's like a road between his village and the other village. He'd seen one on other islands and said, "I want one of those". There were two problems with this, one was not everyone in the other village wanted to be connected to them because they'd been fighting them for generations and didn't want them to just be able to pop down there in about five minutes. Some of the village elders were in favour of it but not everyone. The second problem that virtually the entire terrain, about 15 miles of it, between the two villages was swamp!

I arrived at the first village and sat down, we talked with the chief and his tribal council, he told me what he wanted and it all seemed clear. Then, at the end, five young girls walk in, none older than about ten, I asked "Are they going to dance?", "Oh no", the chief says, "You must select one". "I can't do that", I say, "But you must" he says. I look over at Nuku, desperate for him to get me out of this tribal mess and he's got a huge grin on his face. "Bastard", I think, "he knew this was coming, he's set me up!"

I collared him afterwards and said, "Why didn't you tell me that was going to happen?", he still thought that it was hilarious.

Well, I had to select one, it would have been a terrible snub to refuse. So this girl comes into my room, I explain to her that she just has to sleep by the bedside but that I wouldn't tell anyone so she wouldn't lose face. I asked Nuku what he did, and he said that he did the same. At least that's what he told me anyway.

When I went across to the second village the same thing happened, this time I'm a bit more familiar with the process, I very solemnly select one girl and repeat the charade, it's just really weird.

I was chatting to a doctor from the World Health Organisation later and he said that the same thing happens to him everywhere he goes to villages in the Pacific. I asked him how he coped with it, he said that he was used to it now, that it was just part of dealing with tribes and tribal customs.

Tribal law was very strict, if someone broke it the elders would kill them, they didn't hesitate. I never tried to interfere with these customs, it wasn't up to me to change them, I don't think I ever tired. I did speak to Brian about them once and he agreed, that we should keep our noses out of it, that trying to change things would be very difficult and would cause conflict.

I never tried to cajole anyone to come down from the villages to work with us, any new people that we did get were always sent down with the blessing of their elders, always through Nuku, I never had anything to do with that side.

Nuku was very well respected by the locals and going down from the villages to work in the city was regarded as a good thing, if approved by the elders.

Nuku was always the one who recommended job changes or promotions to me as well. This was also seen as a very positive step by the people in their village, maybe for no other reason that they could send more money back to the village.

There was also nothing I could do about people needing to go back to their villages, Nuku said that there was nothing we could do about it because if they changed their mind they would lose face.

Most of the other group activities were organised by the religious groups, there was no Lions Club or equivalent.

A lot of them were really smart but knew very little about the outside world unless they'd gone to Australia or Papua New Guinea and very few of them could afford that. Not that going to PNG was a good thing because it taught them too much of the wrong things but the ones who went to Australia generally came back with an ambition to change things.

Governing their local tribe had some similarities but it was pretty different in many ways from running a government, where you're having to talk to lots of different groups of people, many of whom had very different ideas from what you did. In your tribe you're only ever dealing with your own people and you ended up being really parochial, you only ever cared about your own island and your own people.

They didn't really excel at any part of the government process. For example they knew almost nothing about economics apart from bartering. The concept of buying and selling any higher quantity of anything that you couldn't eat or consume in the immediate future was completely alien to them.

They had a "one-toc" culture, everything was within their village and didn't extend beyond that. It was a very primitive system.

## ***The Magical Kingdom of Oz wasn't built in a day***

I also did a lot of socialising with the locals, there were an increasing number working for the government in different areas, politicians, business people. I always got on very well with the locals. Many times they came up to me and asked me for help about a wide range of things ranging from how to start a business, what the pitfalls were, and I always helped them out as much as I could.

When I first got there, the chief of the Public Works Department and I didn't get on. He was a Pommie architect who just didn't appear to like Australians, which was quite strange because he retired to Cairns soon after. I sincerely hope that he had a miserable, whinging retirement.

My main problem with him was that he wanted us to do all of our work for him for bloody peanuts as they'd done in the past and I wouldn't. We spent a long time on the back and forth of, "Here's my price", "It's too high", "That's what it is", "You won't get the job", "Well take it somewhere else", knowing that there was nowhere else.

His deputy was another Scotsman, he and I got on quite well, he was an engineer and pretty well all the negotiations after a while were done through him. I guess the chief finally accepted that he was going to have to pay a higher price but didn't want to have it rubbed in all the time by actually dealing with me.

The chief also got roasted pretty badly by the new Governor when he arrived because of the infighting between he and I. Apparently the governor dragged him into his office one day and told in no uncertain terms that he would work with me, that he would do everything in his power to work with him, that they needed me more than they needed him.

As the business started to build I started to do a lot more travel, I was always flying here, there or somewhere bloody else. Some of these jobs were government but many were from the private sector, my reputation was starting to spread!

I initially thought that travel between the islands would be pretty primitive, tiny little planes powered by lawn mower engines, but the service was pretty good. Sol Air it was called, they used to fly to all of the islands – Guadalcanal, Malata, Choisal, Munda, Santa Isabelle plus there was a myriad of small islands, there was one up near Munda called Thousand Bay Island Lagoon, there were also the Russell Islands between Guadalcanal and Munda. They were almost entirely run by Lever and Kitchen, who had huge coconut palm oil plantations down there.

The person who I worked most closely with over the whole time I was there was Nuku. I liked Nuku, he was there when I got there, he'd been working with Concrete Industries for some years. He was a Fijian but had come over with his family and was fairly well entrenched there. He was a fairly quiet sort of a bloke but he did know a lot about what was going on. He's done his carpentry in Fiji before he came to the Solomons.

His greatest asset was that he knew everybody, the locals, the British, the Chinese, everyone. There was no problem with me coming in as his boss, he only ever expected to be manager of Concrete Industries, not the whole conglomerate, I told him afterwards that he should be looking to go higher because he certainly had the assets to do it but he lacked the skills of how to talk to people at the higher levels. He was a classic second-in-command, the sort of person that every great business needs.

I was always very careful to include him in every major discussion that I had with anybody because I was always mindful of what Brian Derrick had asked me to do, which was to bring on the local people, and I considered Nuku to be a local person. It brought him out of himself tremendously, the first year he was very hesitant, I had to ask him things all the time but by the second and third year I didn't have to do that, he told me! He was very good at telling me what we should and shouldn't do.

He didn't get involved in any of the other businesses, he just stayed within Concrete Industries, he was the construction manager. The managers of the other businesses were a mixed lot. The guy who ran the concrete works was pretty good, the bloke who ran the hotel took a bit of winning over, the bloke who ran the joinery works wasn't exactly anti, more that he didn't care, he was getting on, comfortable. I don't think he was too worried when I said, "Bill, I think it's time for you to go". I brought another fella up from Australia, he came from Hamilton and was a fully qualified joiner and I made him Singh's deputy. He was very au fait with the modern things. I was bit worried that there'd be a clash there but they got on pretty well.

We were also still doing just about all the PWD work, we were also doing a fair bit of work for Lever & Kitchen. There was no one else who could do this sort of work, we had the concrete batching plant, we had a rock crushing plant. Zero shipping costs for a lot of the raw materials.

It was a lot easier than the first year, in that year we didn't have a lot of work, but the in the second and third years we were snowed under.

We had a lot more work from the PWD because Britain was working towards extracting themselves from the country. As part of this process they said to the locals that they'd commit to spending an agreed amount of money to bring the country more up to date.

I was able to spend a lot more time concentrating on Concrete Industries because I now had competent managers in the businesses and they only came to me if they had a problem.

At the end of that first year Brian had bought the Mendana hotel and wanted to expand it. We didn't have a massive amount of work on at the time, in the last three months of my first year, so it was good that we could keep our people employed and busy. When I came back after Christmas we had two or three new jobs waiting for us.

The last year was much easier for me because I'd put all of the people in the places that I wanted them but it was never dull, there was always enough on my plate.

Concrete Industries was still the biggest business, Nuku was running most of the day to day business and only coming to me for exceptions.

I think that the business that changed the most was the construction side, it was much more streamlined and modernised. Everybody understood that when they took on a job it had time limits, and it wasn't just the workers that I had to teach, it was the foremen as well, I had to teach them how to do project planning, how to do bar charts, that helped them a lot because they knew that they had to keep track of what they were doing.

## ***Building Oz one day at a time***

To change things, the first thing I did was to get all of the various heads of the operating companies together for a meeting. The joinery works was run by an Australian, the concrete works by a German, the hotel was run by a Pommy-Chinese, the hardware store was run by an Australian, the electrical works was run by a Chinese, the paint shop was run by an Australian.

So, I got them all in and told them that things had to change, that we had to bring the whole lot into a more modern way of thinking. Unsurprisingly none of them agreed, to a man they didn't want to change, they'd all been there too long. I told them that it was really simple, either you change or you go. I wasn't too worried about the main business, Concrete Industries, because Nuku was there and he was a pretty sensible sort of bloke, but even Nuku couldn't always do it, he'd get sidelined sometimes with local issues. I told him that he had to look past those issues and make the decisions and that not everyone was going to love him for doing it, that it didn't happen that way, that he wasn't their mate.

Even then, in Concrete Industries, in the early days I had to lead by example, I had to show them more modern technology because they'd never heard of it. For the most part they were pretty willing to learn, I didn't have a great deal of trouble with them because Nuku was very keen to learn as were most of the Fijian blokes, who made up most of the job foremen.

I showed them how to do concrete boxing, how to mix concrete, how to put down a concrete floor quickly and effectively.

Concrete Industries at that time were building a lot of the buildings in Honiara itself, but they way they put up a lot of the form work was done in a style straight out of the 1940s. I had to be almost like a job foreman, in those early days I was out on the job at 7 am.

The concrete works was mainly supplying ready-mix concrete so we only had to change a few things there, I only had to bring in some different chemicals to make the concrete better. They also made pipes, kerbing but they were all pretty straightforward.

The hotel however was a different story, I had to jump on that. I put it to the hotel manager, Charles, very early in the piece that he either had to change or I'd move him on. This was a little tricky as I knew absolutely nothing about running hotels! It was called the Mendana hotel, the largest hotel in the Solomons, it was quite a profitable business, they had a steady number of people going through there, especially the Japanese and Americans.

My first experience of the hotel was that they used to have steak night on a Sunday which they held on the balcony facing out over the ocean, it was a good night, they had beautiful steak, so that was run pretty well. The actual running of the hotel wasn't too bad but the control of the finances was hopeless. When I first asked him for the hotel accounts he didn't want to give them to me. That made alarm bells go off in my mind I can tell you! But it turned out that he wasn't fiddling the books or anything, he was just sloppy and was embarrassed to hand them over.

My problem was how to find out if the hotel was being run well when I knew nothing about hotels. It also wasn't a matter of people going elsewhere, they had nowhere else to go! It was the only hotel in the Solomons, the Chinese started one up not long after that, but it was pretty hopeless. He was a pretty affable bloke and he seemed to get on well with everybody but he just really lackadaisical. I actually stayed there for a couple of nights when I first went up there as well as one night when we all first got there.

It was quite strange staying in a hotel that I actually ran! I noticed that the condition wasn't great, it was all just a bit scruffy, I told Charles that the place could do with a good cleanup. "Very difficult to get staff" he said, I asked him who the chambermaid was, he said that it was a local girl. I told him that I thought he needed someone with a bit more experience, I told him to look around the local population to see if there was someone with that kind of experience.

He looked around and eventually found an English woman who had actually worked in a hotel before, bizarrely it was actually the wife of the PWD chief who I didn't get on with that went to work in the hotel as the chambermaid. She was very good and once she started then it got significantly better.

Once a fortnight someone would lob in from Nauru, a Nauruan minister, and he would buy every bit of grog in the entire hotel put it on a plane and take it back to Nauru. Charles would then have to completely restock the bar so for two or three days they would be, in true Slim Dusty terms, no grog!

I said, "This is not on", he said that we made good money out of it, I said that I didn't care, that we had to give good service. They used to do the same thing to the Guadalcanal Club as well until their new manager stopped them from doing it there. I suggested that he could sell them 70% of our grog and that he if he wasn't sure then he could call me, I'd come down there and we'd sort it out.

Shortly after that the Nauruan Minister for Home Affairs came storming into my office complaining that Charles wouldn't sell him all the grog, "That's because I've instructed him not to", I calmly replied, "why don't you order it beforehand?" He replied that someone else was coming in and they were having a party. Planning seemed to be beyond them, they made the Solomon Islanders look fantastically organised.

Charles, after my first little head to head with him must have decided that he wanted to stay so he smartened himself up. A couple of outside people said to me, “What have you done to Charles? The hotel’s a lot better. The service is better, everything’s better”. I had little trouble with the Chinese bloke who did the electrical stuff, which was good because I didn’t know anything about electricals either!

The bloke who was running the Toyota agency was very hard to get on with, he was an Australian bloke from Frankston, and we had a big confrontation one day, he told me to keep my sticky nose out of his business, that he would run his business how he saw fit. I hadn’t really asked him to do anything different, I’d just popped in from time to time and asked him how things were going, but he took exception to that.

I didn’t say anything at the time but I rang him later and said, “Meet me in my office at five o’clock”, he asked what for and I told him that we had a few things to discuss. He arrived, I told him to sit down. I told him that I was the boss of Solomon Islands Investments, of all the companies. “No you’re not” he replied, “Yes I am” I said, “When I ask you to do something, unless you have a really good reason why you shouldn’t, then I expect it to be done”. “Well, I’m not doing to do it” he says, “I run this business, I was hired by Brian Derrick and I’ll do what I like”. I told him that he better do as he was told or that he’d be on the next plane out of here.

He didn’t like that. He yelled, screamed, ranted, raved. I said, “Ring Brian, now”, and pushed the phone across the desk to him. He couldn’t do immediately because it would have been too late in Fiji. “Ok, you ring him tomorrow morning”, I told him.

The next morning, I didn't hear from him, I didn't say anything. The next thing I know Brian rings me, "Believe that you had a bit of a confrontation". I explained that I'd just told him that he had to conform to what you and I had agreed to do, he wasn't doing that and that if he didn't then he'd be gone. "That's good" Brian replied, "I told him exactly the same thing".

The next time I saw my Toyota man, two or three days later, at a function, I didn't say anything but he came up to me later and told me that he'd spoken to Brian, who'd "explained a few things to him", knowing Brian it was hard to keep a straight face at this point, "Is that so?" I innocently replied. He told me that if I was unhappy with anything he'd done then I should tell him. I said that I didn't want to, that he knew more about Toyotas than I did, that I wanted it to be the other way around, that if he had problems then he should come to me and we'd sort them out. "Fair enough" he says and after that we got on fine.

The joinery works was a big, big business, probably bigger than Concrete Industries, they made furniture, windows, doors, cupboards, and ran a sawmill. We were shipping stuff to New Guinea, the Marshall Islands, Philippines, the west coast of the US, we supplied all of the furniture for the new hotel in Nauru. I don't know how it started off, I suspect that the German bloke before me must have set it up. I don't know how builders in Los Angeles got to hear about a joinery making doors in Honiara but it was well established when I got there.

It had been going for 25-30 years, the Australian bloke Bill, my next door neighbour, who was running it was pretty competent but he had a 2IC who was a Fijian-Indian who was better than the manager so I always had this fallback situation. Singh and his wife Nancy wanted to stay and he came to me one day and said that he didn't like what was going on, that the business wasn't being run properly, that it should be run smarter. He said that Bill didn't want to change.

We had plenty of timber locally, it came from the hills behind Honiara. It started to get a bit hairy in my second year there, after Bill had gone and Singh had taken over. He said that he was struggling to get decent logs into the sawmill, that he couldn't get them, that the locals wouldn't sell him the logs, not just to us, that they wouldn't sell them to anyone because they weren't making enough money.

At that time, I'd just been back to Australia for the first Christmas and I was watching a show, rejoicing in having television again, about a saw milling operation that one man could do, using something like a big swing saw. It came from when they were cutting big logs up along the Murray, this bloke had developed a saw that could saw up logs of up to a certain length much more effectively, it would saw them into 6 x 12 inch pieces, send them on to the mill, who would take it from there.

I thought that this might make a good solution so when I returned I approached one of the village elders and asked him what he thought about the idea. He looked me right in the eye and asked, "Who would get the money?" "You would" I replied, "I'll get the machines for you, I'll hire them out to you, you get the logs into the joinery and we'll cut them from there.

I'd recently bought a big seven band saw, an enormous thing, absolutely terrifying in operation, blades taller than a man. The American Army didn't want to take it, they had just stored it in one of the Nissan huts, I don't even know what they had it for. I saw it there and asked one of the guys what it was, "It's a seven blade band saw", "How long has it been there?", I asked, "It was here when I came" he replied,. He didn't even want to get rid of it. I spoke to Singh and asked him if he knew about it, he didn't, so I asked him to go and have a look at it.

When he came back he was ecstatic, “Do you think we could possibly get that?” he asked, I said that I’d find out how much the guy wanted for it. I asked the guy whether he wanted to get rid of it and if so how much he would want for it. He said that he’d have to check State-side in the dreaded Procurement department and find out. About a week later he returned and said that they’d be happy to field an offer for it. So I made him an offer and he said, “OK, that’ll do”. I had no clue about how much it was worth. I offered him \$1,000 for it, which wasn’t too outrageous because the Army guy had no clue about how much it was worth either! Singh had an idea, he said that if we wanted to buy one of those new it would cost over \$25,000. Curiously he didn’t pass this information onto the Army. It even came with a whole stack of spare parts, band saw blades that they were happy to throw in as part of the deal. We never had to buy any more spare parts for the machine for the rest of the time I was there.

The only trouble that we had with such high speed blades was that some of the timber from areas where the fighting was in the war was riddled with bullets, when the band saw blade hit one of them it would break and when it’s spinning at 1,000 revs a minute you don’t want to be around when that happens. Luckily no one was ever hurt when it happened but everyone in the whole joinery always knew when it did. I did have to put a ban on taking timber from anywhere near Honiara itself just to be on the safe side, we had to go further down the island. The locals weren’t too happy but it was just too risky.

To get the timber from the villages I needed some local help, Solomon Mamaloni was very helpful, a couple of the other politicians that I’d got to know also helped and a couple of people who ran businesses who knew the locals also helped.

They all gave me similar advice about dealing with the locals, “Just always tell them the truth”, they said, “don’t beat around the bush, don’t be like the British always telling them only half the story”. I never dealt with just the chief himself, I always dealt with all the tribal elders, there was always someone there who could speak English. They always wanted to know just one thing, “How much money?” Part of the problem that had caused them to be reluctant to sell timber was that they were genuinely getting ripped off.

They must have been happy with the price because they even delivered them to the joinery, which is pretty impressive really that a group of tribes people could deliver logs up to 12 feet long from the hills. They chopped them down with chainsaws, split them into logs and delivered them. We had to ask for some much bigger ones when we built the bridge in Malata but generally the logs weren’t that big. They needed some 3 ton trucks to transport them, and lucky old us we happened to have a Toyota dealership so we sold them the trucks as well!

In the first six months I didn’t do a lot of relaxing, I was pretty flat out with the work and meeting a lot of people from the government. Brian had stressed that I had to get involved with the people as early as I could because this would count towards us getting jobs, that we needed to exploit what was there. So my hectic schedule wasn’t all social, there were business networks to build ... and governments to influence!

## ***Off To See The Wizards (Yes Minister!)***

Brian wanted me to contact the government and work with them. I wasn't sure how one contacts the government, you can't just ring up and say, "Please can I speak to the government?" but the problem was solved because the government actually rang me!

The phone rings at about 10 pm one night, he said, "My name is Solomon Mamaloni, do you know me?" I said that I'd heard of him but didn't know him. He said, "Can I come and talk to you?" "About what?" I replied, he said that he just wanted to talk to me, that I'd just taken over a fairly major company in the Solomons which employed a lot of indigenous people and that he'd just like to talk to me.

I must admit that the thought of having the President-elect of a country chatting to me in my house was just a tiny little bit weird. I'd met politicians before in Australia but they'd never been to my house and I'd never met a President before.

So, about four nights later, he knocks on the door, we sit down and I ask him how I can help him. He then changed his tune, he said that he'd probably put me off a bit by telling me the initial story but that he wasn't really interested in that, he confessed that what he was really interested in was finding someone independent that he could talk to who wasn't associated with the British. He was concerned that they were telling him one thing but not telling him the whole story, that it was very difficult with the government at that time.

I asked him why he thought I could help him. He said that I could do it because I was new, I was Australian and I was going to be running the second biggest company outside of the public works department in the Solomons. Only Lever & Kitchen were bigger than us, they ran palm oil plantations all over the Solomons but within Honiara we were the biggest employer of indigenous people outside the government.

He was very guarded when we first started to talk, but we met a number of times and we met at various functions and he was always asking me questions and obviously he came to trust me.

It must have helped that I passed my first test, which was that he told me that the British government had decided that the Solomon Islands would be broken up into five major areas, that the five major islands were to be equal groups within the Solomon Islands government and he asked me what I thought about that. At that stage I'd only ever been to one of the other islands, Munda in the west, so I couldn't really comment. He asked me when I'd be going to the other islands. I told him that I was going to Malata in the not too distant future and to Choisel maybe a couple of weeks after that so I'd be in a better situation to talk then.

When we met again he asked me what I thought about it now. I told him that I found it extraordinary that power would be broken up that way because Honiara was the only developed island, whilst Malata has a large population it had very little development, Choisel only had about 3,000 on the whole island, Munda was somewhat developed but it was almost nothing. I told him I couldn't understand why they would do that, to compromise by making it as even as possible. He asked me whether I thought it would work, I told him that although I was no expert in these matters I would be surprised if it did.

He asked me what I thought would happen and I said that as soon as you finish your first three year term the Presidency would pass in a round-robin to the next island and so on. I told him that he was obviously a well educated man but there was no certainty who the next President would be or even which island they would come from. I suggested that regardless of which island was next that the person wouldn't be as well educated as you.

I told him that I thought that there would be considerable friction between the five islands about who gets what. He told me that all the assets would be split up equally, I said, again, that I found that strange, Honiara had the only basis for a society in it, all the development was there. He said that I was very frank about it, I said that I was only answering the question! He said that it would have to be found out later.

So he asked me other things, about schooling, obviously I wasn't an education expert either, I only knew about my own kids but I raised the issue about the apprenticeship scheme. "Ooh yes", he said, "That's a good idea, how can I help you?", "I dunno", I replied, "I haven't even started it yet!" I was snowed under with work, the first six months were so hectic, arse up and head down, trying to change how things worked there to a lower dependence on "Honiara style". If it didn't get done today it could wait until tomorrow, the day after, next week. There were no such thing as timetables on jobs, they just didn't exist.

There were a couple of arguments that we had with the local government department, I can't even remember now what it was about, the governor got involved, Mamaloni got involved, we had a round table conference. Mamaloni opened the meeting and put it bluntly, "I know Karel well, he's helped me a lot and if he says that this is the way it should go then that's it as far as I'm concerned". "Mr President" the governor replied, "If that's how you feel then that's how we'll go". It was all over, just like that. Cue gloomy faces in the local government department.

The President-elect had no power, he was still learning, officially the governor called the shots but the governor was more than happy to teach him. He was much, much better than the other bloke but we still had to deal with all the other heads of departments who were all Poms, we used to call them African Retreads, they'd all come from Africa. This was just about the last place for them, there and Hong Kong. PNG had gone, Malaya was gone. For most of them this was retirements waiting room. I think that the governor had a pretty hard time bringing them into line.

I was invited by Mamaloni to attend the Pacific Conference as a guest. I asked him why he wanted me there, he said that I was the boss of the major builder in the Solomon Islands and that if any discussions came up about infrastructure work that he wanted to do then he would value my input.

I arrive at the conference, turn to introduce myself to the person sitting next to me and discover that it's Lee Quan Lew, the Prime Minister of Singapore. I tell him who I am and unbelievably he says, "I know about you, I understand that you've been doing some good work in the Solomon Islands", I thought, "Wow, this guy finds out about everything!" So we start chatting and I asked him whether he could ask him a question about unions in Singapore.

I knew that he'd recently developed some legislation and procedures about how to deal with unions and I was interested in finding out how he'd done it. He asked me why I wanted to know.

I told him that Solomon had asked me to write the legislation in this area for the Solomon Islands. This had happened a while ago and I was flabbergasted, I told him that I knew nothing about writing government legislation and he'd said, "No, but you do know a lot about unions!" I'd told him quite a few stories about my adventures with the unions in Melbourne but I said that it was a vastly different situation that he was facing here.

Solomon had told me that he had other people in the government who could help me but that he wanted me to be the Committee Chairman and report back to him. He told me that I'd have a full-time secretary.

I gotta say that I was very reluctant to do it but he talked me into it.

Anyway, I told Lee Quan Lew the story and he thought that it was hilarious. "Well", he said, "I knew a lot more about it than you did, but it was a hard slog in the first year".

He said that when they'd drafted the legislation that they'd taken it to the unions and told them that this was how it was going to go. It was a seven point plan, all of which had to be performed before a union could go on strike. It was passed into legislation that if a union didn't follow all seven phases then they'd be put in jail.

I asked him how the unions had taken it and he said, unsurprisingly, that they hadn't liked it much at all. It had simmered for a while and then one union had gone on strike without following the plan.

He said that they'd negotiated with them for quite some time but they wouldn't come round so he'd ordered the police and the army to round up all the union leaders early one morning. Most of them were Indians so we put them on a plane to India.

I said, "But you can't do that!", "I know" he said, "but I did". He said that he had to take a bold stroke, that this was the way we were going to go and if they didn't play along then they'd pay for it. So these unionists land in India, the Indians didn't want them, so they sent them back again. They went back and forth about four times.

After their fourth flight over the ocean, despite having accumulated a shedload of frequent flyer points, the union leader is a bit sick of it and says that he wants to talk. Lee Quan Lew said, "It's a bit late, there's no point talking now. I told you that you had to abide by the legislation and that if you don't, after the next flight to India you definitely won't come back. I assure you that we'll throw you off the plane".

After that he said it all went quiet and everything worked brilliantly. He said that for a new country starting out that he thought they had to be really firm. I thought that pretty firm was an understatement, it was leaning just slightly closer to dictatorship, benevolent dictatorship perhaps, but I didn't tell him that!

So he said to me that he would send me all of his material from day 1 in the process, how they went about it, what they did. Two weeks later a bloke arrives on a plane from Singapore, briefcase in hand, several large boxes of documents in the hold plus several people to help! All compliments of Lee Quan Lew.

They had no current labour problems in Honiara, however a union had just started and the electricity workers had just gone on strike. Problem was that there was no legislation in place to manage any of the situations as they emerged.

So I duly chair the first meeting, told everyone of my chance encounter, they were greatly amused, I then showed them the voluminous documentation that resulted from it and they were then greatly impressed. I suggested that what we had to do was to go through it, figure out what we should use and what we should discard and we're done. Easy!

It turned out that we didn't change a heck of a lot of it, apart from the seven steps ( I think we had three) and we didn't include the bit about getting the army and police to throw people in jail, which I thought might have been just a tiny little step too far.

The earliest union guy was a Solomon Islander who'd gone to University in Port Moresby and must have hung around with a left wing mob and he came back all fired up about unions but it turned out he was really only interested in what he could get himself.

The legislation must have worked pretty well because there was very little union trouble in the whole time I was there. Even the electrical union folded after the first strike had got them a pay rise!

When I first went there, there was no trade school, no apprentices so I started the apprenticeship scheme in the Solomons. Never having set up an apprenticeship scheme before I wasn't sure how to do it but I approached the government and asked them why there wasn't an apprenticeship scheme and was told it was because they hadn't got around to it yet. I asked them how I could go about doing it. He told me that it was a waste of time. The reasoning for this was that they weren't going to be around for much longer. I also suggested it to one of the Public Works Dept. Blokes but they weren't interested. They offhandedly said that they thought that someone might have tried it years ago and it hadn't worked. They didn't tell me why.

I then spoke to a couple of the local politicians, Solomon Mamaloni for one. He'd been educated in Australia, he was a well spoken man who told me that if I wanted to do it, whatever I needed, he'd support me, to just let him know.

Kids in the villages didn't go to school, some in the villages near the big towns did but that was unusual. The missionaries had done some education, particularly on the building side because they needed someone to do the building. I only concentrated on the building side because I didn't know enough about the other areas.

It was soon pretty clear that there were a lot of naturally talented kids, they weren't dumb, and they could really progress if they were given a chance and they were always eager to learn. I proposed it to the future Minister for Local Govt and he was very keen, I mentioned it to Brian, he was also very supportive. The Govt didn't even have to put a lot of money into it, it was really just about setting up the process.

I didn't know a heck of a lot about how to setup an apprenticeship scheme, my entire exposure to it was just having been in one myself, but then again this never stopped me from doing anything else up there so I thought I'd give it a go.

The Brits had tried to train two representatives from each of the five major islands. I'm not sure how the selection process was done. Of the ten, four of them were fairly well educated but I suspect that the other six were selected purely because they were tribal leaders. I think they just wanted to get as much for themselves out of the process as they could.

It must have been really hard for them to understand that they all had to represent the whole of Solomon Islands, not just their own island or even tribe. There was a hell of a lot of infighting went on. I went to a couple of their so-called cabinet meetings, in fact a couple of the cabinet meetings were held in our house! On several occasions when that happened Mamaloni would call me into the room to adjudicate in a dispute.

Money didn't really mean anything to them. I remember a conversation that the future Finance Minister, the tragically named Mr. Checka, had with Mary where he said that he was really looking forward to being a part of the government. When asked why he said that they'd have all this money, that they'd be able to print as much money as they needed.

Mary tried to explain that it didn't work quite like that but he still didn't get it. She then called me over to give him a quick microeconomic lesson but despite both our excellent economic advice I don't think he ever really understood even the basics.

Each minister had a Pommie bloke assigned to him as a coach. I suggested to the Pommie bloke who was coaching him that someone should take him aside and give him some basic economic lessons. I could just see that it was a going to be a real struggle for them. I reckon that it was going to take them several generations to really get good at those processes. If PNG is any example it was going to take a while.

I got on very well with the finance bloke, a Scotsman, he helped me out a heck of a lot, he always tried to help when I had trouble with the PWD but he suggested that sometimes I had to see the governor. I think on two occasions I approached the governor and asked him to intercede when things got a bit strained, and he did. On the second occasion the governor gave the head of the PWD a severe dressing down, told him that if he didn't pick up his socks that he'd be marched off back to England.

The Solomons didn't achieve independence until the year after we left. From what I could see the preparations for independence that the British did were totally inadequate, I don't know whether they started too late, they did train Mamaloni and a few others but he was by far the most advanced of any of them. They had started mobbing some locals in but there wasn't a single head of department or even a deputy head who was a local even when we left. It was really hopeless, I felt sorry for them.

I don't know how they set the date for independence, whether they just pick it out of the air. A lot of the influence came from Papua New Guinea, some of the more enlightened students had gone to University there and they'd come back with these delusions about independence, that they could run their own show, which they didn't have a clue about in reality. You could see that it was going to fail and fail miserably.

## ***Making Oz great***

Over the time that I was there we did some pretty good business but not always in the way that I'd done it in the past

...

***Can you move that wharf an inch to the left***

...

We once got a call from a bloke from Lever and Kitchen with a big problem. We knew him already, we'd been to his house for dinner, we'd arrive at the typical time (about 9:30), have a few drinks and then sit down at about 10:30 for dinner, which went on until about midnight. After dinner, the men retire to the smoking room, the women go to a bedroom. It was like something straight out of a Noel Coward play.

Mary kicked up a fuss about this arrangement, asking why the women had to go into the bedroom, she wanted to know why, just because the men wanted to talk that the women had to crowd into this little bedroom. All the Pommy wives were quite used to it but the rebel without a cause wasn't going to have it!

This guy was probably the most important foreigner in the islands, being the head of the biggest private employer, there were thousands of people working for Levers in the Pacific.

Anyway, this bloke rings me and says that he's got a problem, a damaged wharf in the Russell Islands. A ship had hit it and, in his words, had "moved it over a bit". I told him straight away that I didn't know anything about repairing or rebuilding wharves. He told me that he'd been in touch with a couple of other big firms who worked out of Lae in PNG and they'd told him that the earliest that they could get there to even have a look at it was two years! He'd contacted some other people in the States but the cost was too high. He was in a real fix.

He asked me to just come and have a look at it, he said that he'd organise a plane. So Nuku and I went up to have a look.

Well, one of his ships had given this wharf one hell of a whack, it must have been caught in a gust of wind while docking that had swung the stern around and it had clipped the end of the pier. Parts of it were broken but nothing severe. One of the steel pylons had been snapped off and four or five others were bent.

So they couldn't use the pier, which was costing them big money because they averaged about two or three boats a week, they were taking out a heck of a lot of palm oil.

So Nuku and I strip off, dive into the water and have a look underneath. We came back up and had a bit of a think, the nearest land onto which we could hook anything for towing was about 200 metres away, the nearest point where we could put a big winch on the shore and pull the pier back into position.

At that stage we thought this was the only way we could do it, although to be fair we were just completely making it up, we could only use what we had there. Our finely crafted plan soon unravelled when we discovered that we didn't have a winch with a cable long enough or powerful enough for that matter to pull the bloody thing upright anyway.

We told the bloke that we had to go and get a really big, long and powerful winch that would need a big concrete pad to anchor it into the ground. He asked how long this would take, I told him I didn't have a clue! I didn't even know where I was going to get the winch from let alone whether it'd just rip the remaining pylons out of the seabed.

He asked me to let him know when I had a solution. He rang me every bloody day! I'd been looking around all over the place, New Guinea, New Caledonia, Fiji. Finding a winch with a housing capable of holding 200 metres of cable turned out to be a little tricky. I thought that the mine at Bougainville might have something but they said that anything that hadn't been shipped off wasn't up to the job.

He had an office in Honiara so I went to see him and said that I didn't see any way that we could pull this across. I then just flippantly suggested whether one of their boats couldn't just pull it back upright, after all one of them had knocked it over. "Brilliant" he exclaims, "Will it work?" I said that I'd have to talk to the captain of the boat to see if it had enough power to do it.

At this point I'm still completely making it up, I'm earnestly discussing whether a boat could pull a pier upright not having any clue whether it'd just completely destroy it!

I asked him when the next boat was due, so at that time Nuku and I went back up there and talked to the captain. It would take quite a bit of fast talking to convince a captain to attach his boat to a pier and attempt to pull it out of the sea bed. When I asked him, he just looked at me in this very strange way. I don't suppose that he'd been asked that question too many times previously.

He was a Canadian bloke, and he just looked at me and said, “You want me to hook the pier up to my boat and just pull it over?”, “That’s just weird”, and went away to consult his chief engineer. The request was repeated to the chief engineer, who I was waiting to say in Scotty mode from Star Trek, “She’ll never take the strain Captain”, but I think he was secretly quite amused by the request and keen to have a go at it. He said that he was pretty sure that it would, once this thing was steamed up it had a fair amount of pull.

I said that the problem was that you need to start pulling it but stop very quickly because if you keep going you’ll just bend it the other way. He said that this was no problem, they could just flip the switch on the winch on their boat pretty quickly. I asked him whether he’d give it a try.

Even at this point, we’re all still completely making this up! I would have thought that there would have been a fair bit of tension at this point at the prospect of completely destroying a fairly large and important piece of company property but the captain and engineer thought that it was hilarious. I told him that the boss was very serious about it.

I assumed that the boss had already spoken to the captain because otherwise he’d never have even agreed to consider it. Imagine some Aussie bloke just bowling up to you at the dock and asking whether he’d mind hitching your boat up to the pier and pulling it upright. If someone asked me that I’d have thought that they were kidding, that the men with the secret cameras would jump out of bushes at some point and shout, “Surprise!”

So, they gave it a go, hooked it on, and bugger me it was as easy as pie! In less than five minutes it was done, disappointingly it didn’t even make alarming creaking noises, I got to shout out an urgent sounding, “Cut” at the appropriate point but that was about as tense as it got. A real anti-climax!

It wasn't perfect, it was actually leaning a bit the other way but they had a trawler in the dock as well and they just gave it a bit of a nudge and it was fine. We put some concrete caissons around the damaged pylons and it worked like a charm.

Unsurprisingly he thought I was a bit of a genius after that, he certainly was a lot more friendly towards me and spoke to me a lot more! It took us about two weeks to do the repairs but we could charge what we liked for the repair after it was upright, very good business! I'd already told him that I wouldn't give him a fixed price, it was going to be time and materials, but he didn't even ask how much! He just wanted it done.

### ***Wanna buy some paint? ...***

It was a mixed bag as to who worked best in those second-in-command roles. The bloke who ran the shop, he was an Australian, but from day one I could see that I couldn't have him there for any length of time, he was totally in "Honiara time", he was too old to change. He'd been there a long time, even before Nuku. He told me very early on that I couldn't do without him, that Brian Derrick wouldn't stand me doing anything to him. That probably wasn't the smartest thing to say to me, like waving a red flag. He was the first to go, especially when I found out about the paint. Some explanation is required I think ...

We had the contract with the Public Works Department to paint the white lines on the runways at the airport with this outdoor, very durable paint. We had to do it every year and they always bought some surplus in case some of it was damaged, which rarely happened.

I reckon that he'd been buying this paint every year since close to the end of the Second World War. The same order every year and because there was rarely any need to retouches the stockpile just kept growing and growing and growing.

When I first arrived to look at the books for that business, I'd noticed the orders for paint but I didn't really take a lot of notice, I noticed that it was an annual order. One day, the bloke who worked in the hangars who looked after it had asked Nuku to tell me that he wanted to talk to me.

By the time I left Solomon Islands Investments had about 3,400 employees, it was just about impossible for me to go around and find out everything about what everyone was doing. It was complicated by the fact that they weren't all in Honiara, they were in Malata and many of the other islands. A lot of the time, especially in the early days, I only found out about things when someone like Nuku told me that someone else wanted to talk to me.

On this occasion he said that someone wanted to talk to me in hut 7. "Where the bloody hell is hut 7? I didn't even know we had a hut 7!" I exclaimed

He then cleared off! I reckon that he must have known about the paint and was anxious to be as far as away as possible when I found out. Unsurprisingly this bloke was very reluctant to talk about why he'd asked me to come up, I had to drag it out of him, he umed and ahed, talked about this and that, I asked him what he did and he said that he looked after the Nissan huts full of paint. "We have Nissan huts full of paint?" I reply

Finally he confesses that some of the paint barrels were leaking and that he couldn't stop it.

At that point I didn't even know that we had stock in these bloody Nissan huts. So he took me round and showed me, and sure enough, there was paint leaking out from the bottom, must have been from the 1947 vintage or something.

I asked him what we needed to do about it and he said that we needed to lift all of the drums up, but the problem was that as soon as we would touch any of the others that they would start to leak as well. A far bigger question was now starting to rattle round my brain though as I surveyed the almost never ending stack of barrels that receded off into the distance, “Why have we got all of this bloody paint?”

I’ve got three Nissan huts, each 100 feet long and 40 feet wide stacked to the rafters full of paint!

I then went back to see the store manager because this was part of his empire, and I asked him about the paint. His face went red and then white. He told me that they bought it every year for the PWD. His excuse for buying more paint every year was that the PWD wouldn’t accept use of last year’s paint. He’d never asked them why they wouldn’t accept it and he’d also never contacted Dulux in Lae to check how long the paint lasted. I asked “Why did you keep buying more paint?”, “Because the Public Works Department instructed me to” he replied. He had no idea what he was going to do with the stuff, there was hundreds of thousands of gallons of the stuff.

That was the first thing I did when I got back to the office, contacted Dulux. I knew the guy at Dulux pretty well, we’d done a fair amount of business with him. I was surprised that he’d been keeping quiet about these massive paint orders every year but when I asked him he said that he didn’t know about them either!

I said that I wanted to talk to him about the paint, he asked what was wrong with it, I said nothing, but we’ve got stacks and stacks and stacks of it. “What”, he replied in a bemused voice. “I said, “I’ve got three bloody Nissan huts full of it”. He jumped on a plane and came straight down to see it.

Whilst we were both standing in front of this mountain of paint I asked him whether he could take it back. I gathered from the fact that he burst into gales of laughter that it was probably a No. I then asked him how long it would last, he said about 30-40 years, that the stuff was virtually indestructible. I then asked him what we could do with it, he then uttered the pearl of wisdom that provided the solution, “It makes good pool paint”.

So, this was then the starting point of our new business, pool paint that lasts for 20 years. Just about everyone in Honiara had a pool. The only problem was that no one was going to want their pools painted white, they all wanted blue, so what we had to do was mix a blue dye in it, which unsurprisingly the Dulux guy was happy to sell us, and we were in business.

The next thing I had to do was to stop the PWD making us order more paint every year. I went to see the PWD guy and told him that we weren't going to buy any more paint. “But you have to” he replied, “You've always bought the paint, we need the runways painted every year”. I told him about Mt. Dulux out at the airport, he actually did know about it the cunning swine. I told him that we'd be using the old paint or that he could get his supplies from somebody else.

He said that he'd talk to his boss about it, the architect, the chief of PWD. I then get a phone call from his boss also telling me that I couldn't do this and couldn't do that in his officious voice. I told him that I could and he then repeated the threat to give the order to someone else. “Go ahead” I said, then repeated my favourite line, “No one else in Honiara has the capacity to do this job”. I'd also checked and found that we had a contract with Dulux in Lae for at least the next 4-5 years, so he wasn't going to be able to get supplies from them, they weren't going to sell him any of the paint, so he'd have to get the paint from elsewhere

I didn't hear from him for weeks and weeks. Nuku told me that all the boys at the airfield were asking him when the paint was coming, that they needed to start painting soon because the job had to be done in the dry season and the wet season was looming. He asked me what I was going to do, "Nothing", I replied, "The PWD have to come through us". Nuku said that I was playing a waiting game and I told him to keep his poker face on, that we had a royal routine that couldn't be beat.

Sure enough, the second in charge bloke from the PWD came down and said, "All right Karel, we'll buy the bloody paint from you".

I'd checked with the bloke from Dulux and he'd told me that we could safely use any of the paint up to five years old. That was a lot of paint that we could use.

I got the guys to separate all of the less than five year old paint into one Nissan hut and we used that to paint the lines on the runways.

So, I'm also now in the swimming pool business! I got my store owner to put up some signs near the store saying that we had some extra special pool paint available for half the price of normal pool paint. Soon we were inundated with orders, I think nearly every pool in Honiara got painted within the next couple of months, including mine!

We also advertised it through one of our blokes who had a contact in the Marshall Islands, I spoke to a bloke I knew in Lae and asked him to spread the word around that we had lots of pool paint. We sold nearly 10,000 gallons of the stuff just to New Guinea! The British Line used to deliver stuff to Honiara so I just told the shipping line because I knew all of the captains. When I started playing golf, all of the captains, when they were staying in Honiara, they'd ring up and ask whether they could play golf. I was asked to be their welcoming officer, which I was happy to do. So I had lots of mates in the shipping business

So I just spread the word around the captains and the next time they were in a bar in San Diego or elsewhere they put the word around for me. They even took the orders for us and delivered them, they just chucked the barrels in the corner of the hold and delivered them to LA! So there's a distinct possibility that the majority of the film stars homes in LA have pool paint that has lasted for 40 years courtesy of Concrete Industries and the Solomon Islands Department of Public Works.

I can't remember exactly how much paint we had but it was in the range of 20-30,000 gallons. When I told Brian Derrick, he came to have a look at Mt Dulux the next time he was over. He was initially horrified but I then explained to him that he was now in the pool paint business and would soon be getting an additional bonus income stream. It was also almost free, we only had to pay the shipping costs away from Honiara and when my shipping captain mates took it we didn't even have to pay that! We even did his pool in Fiji. I even used our pool as a sales area. When people came to our house for a swim I used to show them how tough the pool paint was and ask them whether they wanted their pools done. Eventually we sold the bloody lot!

### ***Are you sure that building is straight? ...***

Apart from Nuku as the main success story in regard to bring on the locals there were some other successes. There were a couple of Chinese blokes who took a long time to come round, they kept asking me questions. I asked Nuku who they were and he told me that they owned a few stores in the town. They had a fair bit of money and eventually one of them came to see me and said that he was refitting an office block in the Honiara main street. Nuku and I had often talked about this office block, it had been built really badly by a mob of Chinese alleged builders, the floors sloped, it was really shoddy. He came to me and said that he was taking the job away from these cowboys and he wanted me to take it over.

I asked in what sense and he said that he wanted me to put it right. We went round the building with our theodolite and we made a plan. We showed them our plan, I told him that it was in a hopeless mess and that there was no way that I could put it right. That they had to either bulldoze it or accept that it would have serious flaws (in the floors so to speak).

They didn't say much initially, they nattered away in Chinese to each other for a while. Eventually they said that they'd think about it and get back to me.

Nothing happened for a while, there was no more work done on the building, they'd obviously already sacked the other blokes. Eventually one of the Chinese came back and said that they'd talked it over and said that they wanted to proceed with my second option, (the flaws in the floors). Unsurprisingly I asked them to put it in writing.

I said to them that it wasn't going to be a great surprise to anyone in Honiara that it would have a lean on it, everyone could already see it anyway!

We didn't have a lot of work on at that stage, we'd just finished the first fish cannery and we were waiting for the rice mill to come up. So Nuku had most of his gang available. We went through the place, straightened up what we could, added the last storey that hadn't been done yet.

It only took us about a month. The Chinese blokes were amazed, they used to come and stand out front of the building every day, pointing and clapping, they thought it was bloody marvellous!

These blokes were pretty senior in the Chinese community and they obviously passed the word around. After that I got a lot of work from the Chinese.

***How much? ...***

The first big job that we won, the first job that showed me that the changes that I'd been asking for were starting to happen was the first fish cannery. It still just came to us because we were still the biggest building firm in the country so we didn't have to do anything different from a marketing standpoint. The Japanese cannery firm just came to us with the plans and asked how much, they'd only just arrived in the country.

I was the only one who knew how to build factories although it isn't difficult to build one really, it's just like a big barn and we didn't even have to create the plans, they gave them to us. Nuku was pretty good with plans so overall it was quite an easy job. We didn't make a huge amount of money out of that one because it was a bit difficult, some of the work cost a bit more and took a bit longer than we thought, they supplied all of the steelwork, we just did the foundations and concrete floors. But overall the Japanese were pretty happy with the result.

The first cannery that we built, on Alki, was a small one, more or less a test cannery. It was already under way when I got there, we only finished it off.

I asked Nuku how we went financially on that job and he said that we did OK but could have done better, that we'd had a lot of holdups and changes that had increased our costs. He'd planned that job on his own so he'd done pretty well.

The big chief of Taiyo, Mr Tamanaka, flies down from Tokyo, he and the local boss came into our office with their plans for a second cannery up in Munda in the western Solomons. He wanted to know how soon we could start it and how long it would take to finish it. I was a bit taken aback because I hadn't even looked at the plans yet!

This was big, so I rang Brian and told him that Nuku and I would start work on it virtually straight away. He said that he'd help in any way he could and he did come over a couple of times to check our plans and costs, which was fair enough. This was a big job.

Mr Tamanaka had an interesting background. He was a kamikaze pilot during the war. When he first told me that my first thought was that he obviously wasn't a very good one seeing as he was sitting in front of me, but he told me that he never got to go. His mission was cancelled on the very morning that he was due to go they dropped the second bomb on Nagasaki and of course everything stopped. He'd been given the white scarf, the whole bloody lot, he was primed and ready.

After we'd finished the third cannery we had a bit of a party and after quite a few drinks he told me that he was devastated that he didn't get to go, that he'd gone away up into the mountains for three weeks and hadn't seen anybody, he'd gone to a monastery and prayed. He seriously considered doing himself in, but the monks had talked him out of it.

Anyway, Mr Tamanaka arrives and tells us that he wants to build three more canneries and he wanted us to price those three. The design was to be exactly the same as the one we'd just finished, he told me where they were, I'd gone to look at the sites and was pleased because they were much easier sites than the first one, which was in dense jungle.

We'd landed on the shore to be faced with virtually impenetrable jungle. There was supposed to be an airfield there that the Japanese had build during the war which the Yanks had also used after the war.

They'd told me that we wouldn't have any trouble with the site because it was all concrete but we never found it. We found a pill box and that was it. It was definitely there but we couldn't find it, not even when we dug the foundations for this massive tuna cannery.

So we'd eventually finished the first cannery, not easy because we were still figuring out how to do it and it was very remote, we had to ship everything in by boat, there was a deep water harbour that made life easy, ten feet from the shore it dropped like off the edge of a cliff.

So, it's a big meeting to seal the deal for the other three canneries. Brian came over from Fiji, I presented the plans and the costs for us to build both of the canneries, which had our price for the entire piece of work.

He looked at the draft contract, said that he needed to have a chat with his people, they went away for about five minutes, came back and said that they were very happy with the price. He did say that after we'd done the first one the price for the other three should reflect the economies of scale and experiences that we'd learned from the first one and that our price for the other two should be lower.

The blow strikes the inside of my head like a hammer, he thinks that this is the price for just the first one! I look at Brian who's intensely staring at a point midway up the far wall of the room, he didn't say a word, we never made eye contact which was just as well because I'm sure that we would have either burst out laughing or immediately apologised for the mixup.

I eventually mumble something about Brian and I needing to talk about this for a few minutes.

They head out of the room, Brian puts his head in his hands and mutters, "Did I hear what he said?", I replied that I was pretty sure that he thought our price was only for one cannery. Brian said. "Are you sure?", I said, "Brian, you were there when we double checked the costs". We even got Price Waterhouse, who had an office in Honiara, to check them as well.

He said, "What are we going to do now?", I said that it was a pretty easy decision to agree that we'd give him a discount on the other two canneries given that every dollar that we quoted was going to be sheer profit. We then agonised about how big a discount to give them, it had to be pretty large, I suggested 25%, he said with that large a discount that they'd smell a rat, he suggested 15%. We called them back into the room.

I very solemnly told them, in what surely should have been an Academy award nominated speech, that Brian and I had talked it over and told them that as recognition of their large order and as a mark of goodwill between our two companies that we were willing to offer them a 15% discount.

Mr Tamanaka sits back in his chair and exclaims, “Thank you, thank you, bring sake!” He signs the contract, we all drink the sake. The only question he asked was how long it would take to build the other two, I told him the same time as the first one, he asked whether they could be built simultaneously but I told him , no, because we didn’t have the staff.

I couldn’t believe it. We made millions of dollars on that contract and I never even got a bonus from Brian, the miserable bastard.

### ***Haggler extraordinaire ...***

I think that the most interesting village elder I ever met was one who lived further down the coast towards the east. He had worked with the Allies during the war doing coastwatch and was now one of the top blokes in his area. When we were promoting our scheme of giving the villages the little sawmills we went to see him first. We couldn’t go to see him by road (because there weren’t any!) so we had to go by boat down the coast and then up a river to where this village was.

One of the chief’s sons had been taken by a crocodile about a week before, I expressed my condolences but he took a very pragmatic view, “The silly bastard went to sleep on the river bank” he said.

He was a bit offhand at first, that he'd heard all these stories before about the white man giving the villagers things when all they wanted was the trees. So we stayed overnight and the next morning, while I was having my breakfast of fruit, Nuku comes over and tells me that the chief wants to talk to us again, so we go back, the chief is there with all of his village elders.

Apparently one of the other village elders had worked in Honiara and knew about me, Nuku and Concrete Industries and he must have put in a good word on our behalf. The chief says, "We think that you're a straight man and we'll give it a try". I ask him how many machines he wants and he replies that he only wants one. I ask him when he wants it and he says, "Now".

So, the chief send a couple of tribesmen to Honiara to learn how to use the equipment, we then ship the big saw down on a barge. They then start cutting down their trees, load them onto the barge, take them to where the road starts. All he ever wanted was a fair price. It taught me that the villagers were happy to sensibly harvest their timber as long as I was honest with them. I got the feeling that this wasn't always the case with other people that he'd dealt with. It was good money for them and there were few other ways for them to earn it.

When they got their money they bought rice, a truck to use when the road finally came through. I don't know who taught them this entrepreneurial spirit, there are some people who have worked in the big cities and might have brought it back, the "This is how the West works" process, but they certainly knew how to negotiate!

Before that most transactions were done using the barter system with the village down the road or down the river.

***Do you want rice with that? ...***

It was useful to have a reasonable percentage of expat friends than locals though. The best friends we made up there were an American couple who arrived about nine months after us. He'd arrived to start rice production on a huge scale. He just walked into the office one day, introduced himself and said that he wanted to talk to me about us building a rice mill for him. I'd heard that his company was coming but he told me what they wanted to do in more detail.

They'd bought some land on the Guadalcanal plains which were about 30 miles down the island. They were going to grow three crops a year, continuous cropping, which you can do up there. There were three big rivers that came through that part of the island and as it was about 8,000 feet and the rainfall was about 6 metres a year so there was always plenty of water.

I'd never been in a rice mill, apart from presumably it being full of rice I had no idea how it worked. Apparently the rice comes in, they take the husk off it, in some cases they crushed it into rice flour, in other cases they just cleaned it and bagged it. Within six months they were exporting their rice all over the Pacific. Boy they made some rice there and some bloody money too.

He said that it was going to take him about five months to get the land ready to sew so the rice mill had to be ready within seven months, which was a pretty tight schedule because at that point I didn't have the plans. I told him that without the plans I couldn't give him a price. He sketched it out for me but I said that I still couldn't do an accurate price without a detailed plan because it was a big building, three storeys high. We eventually got the plans and built that a man a very fine rice factory if I do say so myself.

***Are you sure that's right? ...***

Things didn't always go so well in the first year though, we were building an office block for a group of Chinese and the foreman was an islander. It wasn't a big job but I got a call from Nuku on a Sunday night asking me to go round to this site first thing in the morning.

We arrived on the site and it was pretty obvious pretty quickly what the problem was. The foreman had turned the plans upside down and the entire shell had been built back to front, all of the foundations had been poured. Bless him, he didn't have to be told, he'd already figured it out, he and his gang had even gone back on the Sunday and had started re-digging the new foundations. I didn't say a lot, no need to really, although Nuku and I did have a very good laugh about it after we left. Afterwards the foreman said to me, "Why didn't you sack me?", I told him that he'd made an honest mistake, that it hadn't cost us a lot of money, that given that it was his first job, Nuku or I should have checked his work, so we were partly to blame. He'd found the mistake himself and had even started correcting it in his own time.

## *Little house of the prairie*

For the first three months I think we went out every night! We got invited everywhere. After about three months I said to Mary, I don't know about you but I sure can't keep up this pace, we never have a free night!" On night outs they don't start eating until 9 o'clock at the absolute earliest, the fact that it's so hot is a factor but it's also just a tradition, the British brought that tradition from Kenya or Uganda or wherever they'd been. They'd go to someone's house for drinks at about 6:30 then go home and get changed and then you go out for dinner. So we didn't hardly ever get home until 11 pm or midnight ever. Having to get up again at about 7 am I was just getting worn out. So we agreed to cut it back to a maximum of only four nights a week. Sacrifices need to be made you know!

After the first six months it started to get a bit less hectic, Mary was having a great time, no housework to do, I think she went to play cards or tennis every day of the week. She settled in very well, it took her mind off her mum, it helped that her dad arrived about five months after we were there and stayed for three months so she was happy, best of both worlds.

Our diet was pretty standard, what we used to eat in Australia really. The locals were happy to cook Western food, especially our second houseboy Henry. Henry was about five foot tall, he towered over his wife who was about four foot tall, she only came up to about his elbow. He was about the same age as me, about 40, one of his arms was slightly withered from shrapnel during the war, he could still use it, just not as well as the other one.

When he came down and I interviewed him I asked him whether he'd done this sort of work before. He said that he had but had been away for a few years. He came from Malata and had been back there for a few years. I asked him who he worked for before he went back and he casually replied, "The Governor". He just happened to be the chief cook for the Governor. I asked him what he could cook, he started talking about this and that, it turned out that he could cook just about anything!

His major job was to cook and his wife did all the cleaning. They didn't live in the house, they lived in a little two bedroom cottage in the grounds, which was handy because he was never far away.

He was absolutely brilliant, he was with us for the whole of the rest of our stay. It was great that I could just ring up if I was bringing someone home for lunch or to entertain in the evening. I'd just say, "I'm bringing six people home tonight, can we have dinner for 9:30".

"So, Master", he always called me master, which was a bit strange at first but I got used to it. "What would Master like", he would ask, I'd say, "Wait until Missus gets home and just work it out between you". Once agreed he'd just toddle off up the street, but everything he needed and have a sumptuous banquet ready for 9:30.

Probably his signature dish was prawns, he could cook them about ten different ways, he was also very good on fish. Nothing ever floored him, there was nothing that he couldn't do. The kids also loved him, he didn't do anything particular to charm them, he was just Henry. The best thing was that if there was any conflict between them and me he'd always take my side. If Mary told him to do something and I told him to do something else, he'd always do what I asked, even if I wasn't there.

We still had a bigger percentage of expat friends than locals though. The best friends we made up there were an American couple who arrived about nine months after us. We got on very well, his wife was lovely, they were our best friends. They were still there when we left but he left not long afterwards. The company that he was a director of was called Hawaiian Agronomics, they had rice growing projects in Iraq, Iran, Hawaii, Indonesia, Malaya, all over the world.

I thought that it might be a bit weird coming home for holidays after such a different lifecycle but it didn't turn out that way, we loved coming home for Christmas, because we went camping up to the Kiewa valley. I wasn't treated specially, none of the "wild traveller back from the exotic lands with stories to amaze us".

I aspect of living in the tropics that was a little hard to get used to was the very different wildlife. Every year these little red crabs come out of the sea at a certain time of the year, millions of them, and migrate to some location inland. So far so cute but their route to the pilgrimage site passed through a location that now happened to have a house on it. Mine!

We couldn't keep them out, every time we opened the door they were clustered around the door and they just poured in, went straight through and out the other side. In was a little hairy at first but we got used to it after a while, we just used to get the broom and sweep them into piles and out the door. We could have eaten them but we'd have needed to eat about 27 each to get a decent feed.

The only problem that the family had was that sometimes some of them would suffer from misguided radar and turn left up the corridor instead of going straight through the house and end up in the bedrooms, they used to crawl into everything.

The road outside the house used to be bright red at that time of the year.

They also had bird eating spiders, about six inches across, luckily they didn't come into the house, they stayed in the jungle. They'd build big nests across passages where the birds flew.

There were also coconut crabs, who would come out of the jungle twice a year to go to the ocean to spawn and then go back again. There wasn't as many of them as the red crabs, only thousands. They only used to come at night. Shane, Henry and I used to go down the road with a bucket and collect them. They were fabulous eating.

There were also many gorgeously coloured parrots plus lots of other birds that I'd never seen before.

I never heard of any mysterious carnivores that lived in the jungle, there were lots of wild pigs, deer.

There were also a lot of sharks there but strangely the islanders were never afraid of sharks, they used to feed the bloody things! They were really scared of crocodiles but not of sharks, it was very strange. Off one of the islands you could go out in a canoe and they'd have these sticks with coconut shells tied to them, they'd rattle them under the water and the sharks would come from everywhere and they'd feed them as well as getting into the water with them.

Mary definitely liked not having to do any housework, I'd had servants when I was young so I knew what that was like but she'd never experienced having a houseboy and housegirl. She also liked it being hot and humid. At first she was very reluctant to go but once she settled in there I think she realised that it was probably a good thing that she did go because it helped her to forget about her mum.

Her dad coming up helped as well. He had a great old time while he was there, he just sat out on the deck and relaxed. He'd been in New Guinea so he had a lot of experience with the locals. Every year he's spent several months in the Torres Straits with the islanders and he loved it so he got on very well with them.

Mary went to all sorts of different groups about the place. She mainly joined the local church groups, she did volunteer work for them. She also joined the various card groups.

I think that the main thing she didn't like was that it was a long way from anywhere, she was homesick but having her dad there helped.

Even if Western food was only available in bursts when "the boat" arrived, you could always get the local food, there were always vegetables around but sometimes meat got a bit scarce.

Kerrie was doing her last year at school so she wasn't happy to have to do that a different way. I think she just generally felt that she didn't fit in, she never really got on well with the locals. What we didn't know was that my mum was sending her letters telling her to come home. She just never settled, she was at a difficult age, typical teenager. She never even came back on holidays, she never returned.

When Kerrie first said that she was going back Mary kicked up a terrible stink but I said that we couldn't stop her, that if her attitude was going to be so bad that it would make life difficult for everyone. She was at an age when she had to start making her own decisions, so away she went.

Luckily that was the only really major family drama that happened to us in the three years that we were there, so I can't complain too much.

Lisa was too young to be hard to get on with, she got to know some girls of round about the same age as friends, they were always going to each others houses, and Shane just loved the outdoor life, he could live the Huckleberry Finn life, he could go anywhere and do anything, preferably outdoors.

Neither of them were thrilled about Kerrie going back, they both told her that she was stupid, that she didn't know a good thing when she saw it.

Lisa was the easiest to manage with the changes, she was the most easy going and Shane was just happy if he could run around outside. He got on very well with the locals too.

Shane got very involved in the fishing, he loved fishing. The houseboy who lived next door had a little boat, a little canoe with an outrigger on it. He and Shane seemed to spend most of their time out on the bay fishing.

## ***All work and no play ...***

The first sport that I took up when I finally got some time was golf. The local course was only nine holes but very nice, it had a clubhouse and a bar, no greens, it had browns. One of the Civil Service chiefs, a Scottish bloke, who I'd met very early in the piece and had got on very well with, he'd told me who were the arseholes and who were the good ones, as the Scots do. He was a nice bloke, a wry sense of humour so we hit it off pretty well right from the start. He asked me to come down and play golf, I told him that I was too busy, he said that they played at 4 pm on a Wednesday afternoon. Of course at 6 pm it's dark, it's the tropics, it's like someone hitting a switch, boom, dark! So I took up golf again. I used to play golf once during the week and then again on either Saturday or Sunday. It was nice to confirm the old cliché though that lots of deals do actually get done on golf courses.

They also had three floodlit asphalt tennis courts there. One of the wives approached me one day and asked whether it was true that I played a fair bit of tennis in Australia. When I said that I did she asked whether I could help. It turned out that the courts hadn't been used for about three years, she said that a lot of people wanted to play and that someone who was President of the Belgrave Tennis Club has great credentials to get things started. They asked me whether I'd take it up and I agreed. We started tournaments every Sunday and during the dry season we also had competitions on Wednesday nights. It took off like wildfire, very quickly the membership jumped to about 60. More and more Australians and New Zealanders were coming to Honiara and wanted to play.

Of course no location was immune to me trying to fish it, Shane and I experimented around the place, mainly sea fishing. There were quite a few little rivers came in down the coast, Shane and I used to go exploring, we used to see a lot of fish in there as well as big fresh water shrimps, bigger than yabbie size. We did some ocean fishing as well.

We also, very early in the piece, took up bridge. I had played before but Mary never had. The etiquette for bridge was very strict, there are a lot of unwritten rules and structures. Even though I'd played before, my experience was pretty limited, nowhere near the intensity that was played there. If you led the wrong card an insult in a cut-glass accent would be hurled across the table, "Why did you lead with that card? I tried to instruct Mary as best I could and she got pretty good at it. Most of them were full of hot air about how good they were but there was a Chinese bloke who owned some stores, he was really good. He and I had some good battles.

Even though I was pretty fit before I went there I got even fitter after I arrived, months and months of working outdoors with concrete and doors and frames made me as fit as a butchers dog . The fact that you always sweat like buggery helps as well.

A new governor arrived about six months after we did. He'd been the vice-governor in Hong Kong and his aide-de-camp rang me one day and asked whether the governor could come and play tennis, he was apparently a very keen tennis player. He was a tall lanky bloke, very nice to speak to. The first match that he played he made quite an impact. Literally, with a light post next to the court. I saw it happen, he went down like a sack of spuds, and I thought, "Oh no, the first time he visits us and we've got him killed".

We raced over, got him to his feet, he had a nasty cut on his head so we took him up to the hospital and they stitched him up. His aide-de-camp rang me the next morning apologising profusely for him ruining our night. We assured him that the game went straight on after he left! He asked whether he could come back and we assured him that he could as long as he stopped breaking the fixtures and fittings.

I next met him at a governor's ball a few weeks later where he greeted all the people. For each ball there was a special costume, a "rig" that had to be worn. This one was a South Seas theme. He was dressed in a cummerbund and a bow tie, he had a coat on, it was bloody boiling. Mary and I were waiting in line, "How are you Karel", he said, I introduced Mary. He was sweating, I was sweating, and he said, "Karel, if you take your tie off, I'll take mine off".

He and I got on very well. I suppose it would have been really hard for him to have too many airs and graces when he'd made such a fool of himself on the first occasion that we'd met!

As well as politicians I even met film stars, Leslie Nielson! He flew in by plane on one occasion, he was looking to make a movie in Honiara. I called in to the Guadalcanal club on the way home one night and the manager said to me that there was a bloke here that I might know, Leslie Neilson. There was hardly anyone in the club, I think I was there a bit early, on my way back to get changed for the inevitable dinner party that night.

So I start talking to him, I tell him what I do, he says that it was a very interesting place, he said that where they were planning to shoot the movie was gorgeous. I asked where all of the others were and he said that he liked to get to a location early, to be first there. At that stage in his career he was an action movie star, before he branched out into comedy. We talked for about an hour, I got into trouble from Mary when I went home, but how many times do you get to talk over a beer with Leslie Neilson!

## ***Back to Kansas***

I could see though that independence was looming, that it would probably happen the year after we left, that the situation was going to be pretty hectic. I could see that law and order was going to break down without the British being there, I think the handover date had been set as the Christmas after we left.

At the end of the three years I had the option to stay for another three. I sat down and thought and from what I could see there were going to be a lot of changes and not all of them were going to be good. With the kids getting older that worried me.

Brian Derrick said that he would have been very happy for me to stay on but the amount of money that he was talking about for an extension wasn't brilliant given the drama that I could see was going to happen.

I was also offered the job as Head of the Public Works Department, I could have become a public servant! That would have certainly been a case of poacher turned gamekeeper but the money they were offering there wasn't great either. Mamaloni wanted me to take it, he said that he'd look after me but I told him that I didn't see myself as a public servant, I just wasn't built that way.

The other job that was much more tempting was with Hawaiian Agronomics, that was a real good job, the wildcard. The opportunity was to be their global trouble spotter, the organisation's Red Adair, jetting into troublespots and fighting fires! It came out of the blue, purely as a result of the good work on the rice factories that I'd done for Dick, that he could throw anything at me. I seriously looked at it but it would have meant being based in Hawaii and I think that the troops were keen to go home.

I would have liked to have stayed there for another three years but things would have been really different. Mary went back about four years after we left and met up with our houseboy, Henry, and he was devastated, said that the place had just fallen apart, that since the Brits had gone, he said, "I want the master to come back" but that wasn't going to happen.

So we left. It was pretty sad to leave. Mary and the kids had gone two weeks before I left. There was a big farewell party for us, a ball! The tennis club ran it, it was after Mary and the kids had left. They gave me a big send off. Once I'd decided to go it actually wasn't too hard to leave, I was a bit homesick for fishing.

We left a bit of stuff up there and shipped the rest back in a big shipping container that took about 6-8 weeks to get back.

I was looking for a job, I didn't have a job to go back to. I'd approached a company in Brisbane who had the sort of project management job that I was looking for. I didn't want to go back to Melbourne because the union situation hadn't improved any while I'd been away and I knew that I'd be targeted again if I went back to Melbourne. So on my way back I dropped into Brisbane and talked to them but the job that they were offering was only going to be for another two years finishing off a job. The prospects after that weren't too bright.

So I arrive back home in Melbourne with no job. Luckily Mr. Mac said to me that he could use my help because none of the boys wanted to help him run the business. John had opened up an office in Ferntree Gully and that's all he was interested in. He said that he didn't want to be the main man any more, he'd still be there but that if I was interested I could take it over.

I agreed to do it for six months and see if I liked it. I'd never been involved in real estate before (there's certainly a trend happening here!) but I thought that I'd give it a go.

Luckily I knew a bit about the real estate business because Mary had been involved in it, she'd worked for her dad for a number of years plus I was heavily involved in the sales environment up there so sales wasn't foreign to me.

It was nowhere near as challenging as the job up there but I got involved in the REIV, got my licence, got onto the member's council. I even went back to school, because I'd left when I was 14 so I had to back and do my matriculation. I hadn't really liked school when I was a kid but this time I breezed through it. I did some of it at Caulfield, some at Prahran and some at Melbourne Uni.

We were lucky to have come back in the summer time so at least we had a while to acclimatise to the weather before winter but it was still a bit of a shock to endure winter again.

At least we finally got to live in our new house! Mary settled back in really well, even though she was back in the same environment I think she'd got over the immediate trauma of her mother's death by then of course.

Both Shane and Lisa suffered a little when they got back because of the schooling. When Shane got back he left the high school and went to St Josephs college, to trade school where he was a lot happier. Lisa was sent to boarding school to try to boost her up a bit but she didn't like that, she only lasted a year, said that she'd had enough.

Lisa came back from boarding school and finished the year at Upwey High. Shane also settled back OK, he still spent a lot of time outdoors and we still had some work to do on the house to finish it off.

I think that the best thing about being back was being able to just go down the street and buy anything you wanted. I could also watch that strange box in the corner again, watch the footy, which I'd missed a bit. They hadn't even had a TV in the Guadalcanal Club so there was no TV up there at all, no satellite dishes in those days!

## *Reflections from back in Kansas*

The country became independent about a year after we left. Once the Poms got out of there the lack of money started to tell, the Australian and New Zealand governments were putting a bit of money into it but the country was poorly run, the old ways came back – corruption, parochial rights. The parliament was always in an uproar, they could never agree about anything. It was really sad.

Solomon Mamaloni did get to be leader after independence, he only held the post initially for three years and it really started to go downhill after he left the post<sup>1</sup>

Once the British left there was no money so all of the businesses started to struggle. The hotel was still going OK but Concrete Industries and the joinery business apparently started to struggle.

Brian brought in a new bloke to replace me up there but when Mary went back about three or four years later she found out that he hadn't lasted very long, only about six months apparently.

I toyed with the idea of contacting some people up there to see how things were going but eventually decided against it, I thought that it would be best not to stick my nose back in, best to leave things alone. I read things about what was happening there and I could see that it wasn't going well.

I've never been back, I've often been tempted. Mary and her dad went back on a cruise about four years later. They said that the place was dirty, everything looked very unkempt. It had degenerated quite seriously.

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon Mamaloni was Chief Minister from 1974 to 1976 and went on to be three times Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands between 1981-4, 1989-1993 and 1994-7. He died from liver failure in January 2000, aged 57.

We were really fortunate, in hindsight, to be there at its peak, there's no doubt about that. Honiara was the only place where there was any large scale work so there was a huge influx of people from Malata, which was only 50 miles away and they virtually took over the capital. There were more of them there than the Guadalcanal people. Tribal war was back.

There were bad riots, they were demanding this and demanding that but there was nothing there to have. The British hadn't left it in a good situation at all, many of the expatriates went, the only large employer left was Lever & Kitchen who still exported palm oil, which was the only real export that the country had.

That export did increase after we left, they converted a lot of the coconut plantations to palm oil because it was much easier to harvest.

I think that Lever & Kitchen are still there, the only ones keeping the country going.

Mary contacted Henry our old houseboy when she went back on her cruise, he'd bought a little house just out of Honiara so she knew where to find him. He was really happy to see her, immediately wanted to know where the master was, when he was coming back. He wasn't working at all, he stopped after we left. He said that the place had really gone to the pack.

He was still going OK, he grew most of the things that he needed so he was self sufficient.

Mary also found Nuku but he wasn't working for Concrete Industries any more, a lot of the Fijians had gone home because there were no jobs left. The government didn't have any money. They all just drifted off.

After Mary's trip back about four years after we left we've had no contact with them, I don't know what they're doing. I'd be surprised if Nuku is still there, I reckon he would have gone back to Fiji. He was pretty experienced by that time, he'd have done well back in Fiji, I'm sure that Brian would have helped him as well.

Brian Derrick stayed on in Fiji. He still had his office there, but he said that he was worried that even Fiji was starting to deteriorate, the big fight there was between the Fijians and the Indians. He was very pessimistic about what would happen there. He said that he'd probably only spent another 5-10 years there and he'd come back to Australia to retire.

He did eventually sell all of his businesses. I met him in Melbourne about ten years after we left and he was just about to move back.

I last saw John Urbans in the late 1980s, he'd also retired, he wasn't a well man even when I worked with him. I don't know whether he's still around but he'd have to be at least 90 now.

I don't think that there's anything that I did that I regret or regret not doing. I can honestly say that I think everything I did benefited the company and the local people as well. I was bound by events that happened.

I think the biggest thing that I learned was how to manage people, different people. The locals had to be managed differently and I had to learn how to do that, you had to think differently. I also learned a heck of a lot about how governments work, and how to manage government people. When I first went up there I did my best to be obliging but I soon found that wasn't the best way to treat them. It was much more about finding out what you wanted to do, make sure that what you wanted to do was OK and if they didn't like it then tell them to jump! That was the only way to get any action, otherwise they'd just mess you around forever, typical public servants.

I also learned how to grow a business, when I left there they were all thriving.

I also learned the odd thing or two about politics, I'd never been involved in politics before but I found up there that I didn't know much less than the politicians!

If there was one word that I had use to sum up the Solomons and my experiences there, I'd fail.

But I can find two, "Solomon time". You couldn't get past it, there was nothing you could do, I tried to tinker with it a little but in the end it beat me every time. You just have to deal with it, you can't beat it, so you may as well join it.